



Pericardial Effusion

What is Pericardial effusion?

Pericardial effusion refers to the presence of fluid in the Pericardium.

The Pericardium is a membrane that surrounds the heart forming a protective sac around it. A minimal amount of fluid in the Pericardial cavity is normal for lubricating purposes.

What is the significance of Pericardial effusion?

With fluid accumulating in the Pericardial sac the heart itself will be compressed and blood will not be able to enter the heart. Severe heart failure and even death may occur. Pericardial effusion is a very serious condition in need of immediate attention.

Why does fluid accumulate in the Pericardium?

Pericardial fluid may form as a result of inflammation, somewhat similar to what happens when we hurt a finger and it gets inflamed and swollen with fluid accumulating in the tissues. Bleeding into the Pericardial sac is another cause. Although it may result from blood clotting abnormalities and chest trauma, the most common cause of Pericardial haemorrhage is the presence of a tumour in the heart, the heart base or the Pericardium itself. Heart failure (especially in cats) is another cause of Pericardial fluid accumulation in the same way as fluid may accumulate in the lungs or chest. Fluid accumulation due to infectious disease or foreign material may also occur but is not common.

Inflammation of unknown cause – idiopathic – and presence of a tumour are the most common causes of Pericardial effusion in dogs.

How to deal with pericardial effusion

The amount of fluid must be assessed as quickly as possible by performing a quick ultrasound examination of the heart. Fluid may have to be removed if the heart is being compressed. Analysis of the fluid might help us find the cause. If severe Pericardial effusion occurs for a second or third time, surgical removal of part of the Pericardium will be considered. At Davies Veterinary Specialists this is usually performed by a minimally invasive (keyhole) technique.

The attending cardiologist will provide you with more information as soon as the cause of pericardial effusion is known.

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