

How to keep your dog's heart healthy

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Anyone who has been on the receiving end of a dog's love and devotion knows these furry friends are nothing if not good for our hearts.

There's plenty of research to show that's more than a warm, fuzzy feeling. Studies show dog ownership benefits heart health by reducing social isolation, helping people stay physically active and reducing [blood pressure](#)—major risk factors for [heart disease](#) and stroke. They may even help people live longer.

But a pooch's heart needs attention, too. And there are steps humans can take to make sure they get it. They just aren't the same steps people take to protect their own heart health.

"Diet and exercise do not matter the same for a dog's heart health as they do for people," said Amanda Coleman, an associate professor in the department of small animal medicine and surgery at the University of Georgia's College of Veterinary Medicine in Athens.

But that doesn't mean it's OK for [dogs](#) to be overweight or inactive, Coleman said. It's just that those lifestyle factors don't impact a dog's risk for heart disease the way they do for humans.

"Dogs rarely develop atherosclerosis," a buildup of plaque in the arteries, because of [poor diet](#) and lack of exercise, Coleman said. These and other [heart disease risk factors](#), such as smoking and excessive use of alcohol, can lead to a [heart attack](#) or stroke in humans, but aren't a factor in the types of heart disease that affect dogs.

"Obviously, dogs don't smoke or drink," she said.

Dogs are either born with heart problems—called [congenital abnormalities](#)—or they have age-related degenerative heart diseases. These problems are more common in some breeds than others, but can occur in any dog, Coleman said.

The most common heart problem in dogs is [mitral valve disease](#), a

degenerative condition affecting the gate between the two left heart chambers that can lead to heart failure. Symptoms include shortness of breath, rapid breathing, coughing and occasionally fainting, sometimes brought on by excitement or exertion, said Jonathan Abbott, an associate professor of veterinary cardiology in the department of small animal clinical sciences at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville.

"If you see these symptoms, seek veterinary attention," he said.

A veterinarian should examine your dog for general health reasons at least once a year during its early years and maybe twice a year as they get older, said Emily Karlin, an assistant professor at the Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University in Grafton, Massachusetts.

Annual exams also give vets the opportunity to pick up heart disease symptoms, such as a heart murmur or irregular heartbeat, Karlin said. "Make sure their heart gets listened to every year, so if a murmur or arrhythmia develops, you catch it early."

Heartworm, a parasitic disease that comes from mosquito bites, also can lead to heart failure in dogs, Abbott said. But this can be prevented with chewable, topical or injected treatments.

Regardless of the cause, heart disease of all types may develop without warning, Coleman said.

"Animals are really good at hiding heart disease because they can't tell us how they are feeling," she said. "The most important thing you can do for your dog is to see a vet regularly."

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