Hypertrophic Cardiomyopathy in Cats

Adapted from "Hypertrophic Cardiomyopathy" from the Cornell Feline Health Center

What is hypertrophic cardiomyopathy?

Hypertrophic Cardiomyopathy (HCM) is a heart disease in which the muscular walls of the heart thicken, decreasing the heart's effectiveness at pumping blood. Although the cause of HCM has not been clearly identified, the fact that the condition is more prevalent in certain breeds and that mutations of several heart genes have been identified in some cats with this disease suggest that genetics play a role.

The disease's effects, rate of progression, and predicted outcome vary considerably between cats. Proper diagnosis and treatment can decrease some of the risks associated with the disease and may improve and prolong a cat's quality of life.

How is HCM diagnosed?

Many cats with HCM do not appear to be ill. However, a veterinarian may detect an abnormality in a cat's physical exam or in the information you provide them about your cat's behavior that makes them suspicious for heart disease. To investigate that possibility, blood testing, blood pressure testing, chest x-rays, and/or an ultrasound of the heart may be performed. If the heart ultrasound shows that the heart's walls are thickened, and no other cause of that change- like high blood pressure or hyperthyroidism- is identified, the cat is diagnosed with HCM.

How is HCM treated?

HCM has no known cure, and in most cases the disease will progress throughout a cat's life. In cats whose disease is detected before signs of illness are present, medication may or may not be used. No therapy has been shown to prevent the worsening of HCM, but medication may be employed to prevent dangerous blood clots from forming within the heart.

In cats whose disease is detected after symptoms are present, treatment aims to minimize those symptoms and reduce the consequence of the heart's reduced function on other organ systems. Medications are often used to control the heart rate, alleviate lung congestion, and correct blood pressure.

What is the prognosis? What should I watch for?

The prognosis (predicted outcome) for cats with HCM is variable. Cats that do not display any clinical signs are often able to survive for years with only mildly compromised heart function.

Feline Rescue
593 Fairview Ave N
Saint Paul, MN 55104
Phone: 651-447-6946
Email: Veterinary@FelineRescue.org

Cats who present with low body temperature or signs of heart failure, such as labored or rapid breathing, open-mouthed breathing, and lethargy, have a worse prognosis. However, in many cases, medical therapy can significantly improve even a sick cat's quality of life.

A serious and potentially life-threatening consequence of HCM is the formation of blood clots in the heart. These clots may break loose and travel through the bloodstream to obstruct flow in other parts of the body (thromboembolism). The effect of the clot depends on its location. In cats with HCM, clots most commonly block blood flow to the back legs, causing sudden and severe hind limb pain or, in extreme cases, hind limb paralysis. Also, although relatively rare, cats with HCM are at risk for sudden death.

Overall, diagnosing HCM and treating the condition properly can help decrease the severity of clinical signs and may decrease the likelihood of thromboembolism. Regular veterinary visits to monitor the heart's health and function are essential parts these cats' care. While some cats may eventually die from the disease or its side effects, good medical management by attentive owners can provide happy lives for cats with HCM for as long as possible.