

AORTIC THROMBOEMBOLISM (BLOOD CLOTS IN THE AORTA)

BASICS

OVERVIEW

- “Aortic” refers to the aorta, the main artery of the body; “thromboembolism” is blockage of blood flow secondary to the presence of a blood clot in an artery
- “Aortic thromboembolism” results from a blood clot (known as a “thrombus”) that is dislodged within the aorta, causing severely reduced blood flow to the tissues receiving blood from that particular part of the aorta, leading to decreased oxygen in the tissues (reduced blood flow leading to decreased oxygen in the tissues is known as “ischemia”)
- The heart of the dog or cat is composed of four chambers; the top two chambers are the right and left atria and the bottom two chambers are the right and left ventricles

GENETICS

- Although aortic thromboembolism is not commonly thought of as an inherited disease, a commonly associated disease, “hypertrophic cardiomyopathy” (a disease characterized by inappropriate enlargement or thickening of the heart muscle of the left ventricle) likely is inherited
- A family of domestic shorthair (DSH) cats with hypertrophic cardiomyopathy recently were reported to have died from aortic thromboembolism

SIGNALMENT/DESCRIPTION of ANIMAL

Species

- Cats, rarely dogs

Breed Predispositions

- Mixed-breed cats most commonly are affected
- Abyssinian, Birman and ragdoll purebred cats were reported in one study to have a higher number of cases than would be expected normally

Mean Age and Range

- Mean age is approximately 8 years
- Age range is 1 to 20 years

Predominant Sex

- Males are affected twice as frequently as females

SIGNS/OBSERVED CHANGES in the ANIMAL

- Sudden (acute) onset paralysis and pain are the most common clinical signs
- Weakness or paralysis of the rear legs; occasionally weakness of a front leg
- Lameness or gait abnormality
- Rapid breathing (known as “tachypnea”) or breathing distress is common
- Difficulty breathing (known as “dyspnea”)
- Vocalization and anxiety
- Vomiting
- Absent or diminished femoral pulses
- Bluish or pale nail beds and foot pads
- Low body temperature (known as “hypothermia”) is common
- Heart murmur, irregular heart beats (known as “arrhythmias”) or gallop sound (sequence of three heart sounds heard when listening to the heart with a stethoscope; heart beat sounds like a galloping horse instead of normal “lub-dub”)

CAUSES

- Heart muscle disease (known as “cardiomyopathy”)
- Increased levels of thyroid hormone in the body (known as “hyperthyroidism”)
- Cancer
- Generalized bacterial infection (known as “sepsis”) in dogs
- Increased levels of steroids produced by the adrenal glands (known as “hyperadrenocorticism” or “Cushing’s disease”) in dogs
- Disease in which proteins are lost from the body through the kidneys (known as “protein-losing nephropathy”) in dogs

RISK FACTORS

- Markedly enlarged left atrium
- Blood clot within the chambers of the heart

TREATMENT

HEALTH CARE

- Initially, treat cats as inpatients, because many have coexistent congestive heart failure as well as having considerable pain and distress; “congestive heart failure” is a condition in which the heart cannot pump an adequate volume of blood to meet the body’s needs
- Fluid therapy administered cautiously, as many cats are in congestive heart failure
- Supplemental oxygen therapy or a medical procedure to tap the chest (known as “thoracocentesis”) may be beneficial, if pet is in congestive heart failure
- Initially, the affected legs should be handled minimally; however, as blood flow returns, physical therapy (passive extension and flexion of the legs) may speed full recovery
- Initially, these cats may have difficulty posturing to urinate and may need to have their bladders expressed to prevent over-distention or development of skin lesions due to contact with urine, when the hair and skin remain damp (known as “urine scald”)

ACTIVITY

- Activity should be restricted
- Keep the cat quiet and stress-free

DIET

- Initially, most cats have lack of appetite (known as “anorexia”)
- Tempt these cats with any type of food
- It is important to keep these cats eating to avoid hepatic lipidosis (a disease in which fats and lipids [compounds that contain fats or oils] accumulate in the liver)

SURGERY

- Surgical removal of the blood clot typically is not recommended as these are high-risk patients because of severe heart disease

MEDICATIONS

Medications presented in this section are intended to provide general information about possible treatment. The treatment for a particular condition may evolve as medical advances are made; therefore, the medications should not be considered as all inclusive.

- Medications to break up existing clots (known as “thrombolytic drugs,” such as urokinase, streptokinase or tissue plasminogen activator) are used extensively in people and infrequently in cats; these drugs are expensive and carry a significant risk for bleeding complications and thus rarely are used in general veterinary practice
- **Heparin** is the preferred drug in general practice; it has no effect on the established clot; however, it prevents further clotting
- **Aspirin** theoretically is beneficial during and after an episode of aortic thromboembolism because of its antiplatelet effects; “platelets” are normal cell fragments that originate in the bone marrow and travel in the blood as it circulates through the body; platelets act to “plug” tears in the blood vessels and to stop bleeding; if they accumulate in a blood vessel, they may lead to a blood clot (known as “thrombosis”)—aspirin should be administered only under the direction of your pet’s veterinarian
- **Clopidogrel**, an anti-platelet aggregation drug, has some promise for management and prevention of future aortic thromboembolism
- **Buprenorphine** is an opiate used to relieve pain (known as “analgesia”) and to sedate the pet; for stronger analgesia, fentanyl or hydromorphone could be used
- **Acepromazine** may be used cautiously for its sedative effects and to dilate blood vessels (known as “vasodilation”)
- **Warfarin**, a vitamin-K antagonist, is a medication that decreases blood clotting (known as an “anticoagulant”); it is used most widely in people and has been proposed for prevention of re-embolization in cats surviving an initial episode—long-term management with warfarin can be challenging because of the necessity for frequent monitoring and dose adjustments as well as side effects, such as bleeding
- Low molecular-weight heparin (LMWH) recently has been proposed for the long-term prevention of feline aortic thromboembolism; LMWH has a more predictable relationship between dose and response than warfarin and does not need frequent monitoring or dose adjustments; it also has a lower risk of bleeding complications than warfarin
- Treat the patient’s heart disease; medications determined by type and severity of heart disease

FOLLOW-UP CARE

PATIENT MONITORING

- Electrocardiogram (“ECG,” a recording of the electrical activity of the heart) monitoring is helpful to detect heart problems with re-establishment of blood flow (known as “re-perfusion injury”) and high levels of potassium in the blood (known as “hyperkalemia”)
- Monitoring blood work (electrolytes and kidney tests) periodically may be helpful to improve management of the heart disease
- Examine the legs daily to assess clinical response
- Blood-clotting tests (such as “activated partial thromboplastin time [APTT], prothrombin time [PT]) should be performed; decision upon which clotting test is performed and frequency of testing is determined by medication (such as heparin or warfarin) that pet is receiving

PREVENTIONS AND AVOIDANCE

- Prevention of future blood clots in the aorta with long-term (chronic) administration of aspirin, clopidogrel, warfarin, or LMWH is recommended strongly because of the high rate of blood-clot formation

POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

- Bleeding with medications to prevent blood clotting (anticoagulant therapy)
- Permanent nervous system deficits or muscular abnormalities in the hind legs
- Recurrent congestive heart failure; “congestive heart failure” is a condition in which the heart cannot pump an adequate volume of blood to meet the body’s needs
- Sudden death

EXPECTED COURSE AND PROGNOSIS

- Expected course is days to weeks for full recovery of function to the legs
- Prognosis in general is poor—in two studies, approximately 60% of cats were euthanized or died during the initial episode of aortic thromboembolism
- Long-term prognosis varies between 2 months to several years; however, the average is approximately a few months with treatment
- Predictors of poorer prognosis include low body temperature (hypothermia; less than 99° F), and congestive heart failure; “congestive heart failure” is a condition in which the heart cannot pump an adequate volume of blood to meet the body’s needs
- Predictors of better prognosis include normal body temperature (known as “normothermia”), only a single leg affected and presence of ability to move the leg on initial examination
- Recurrence of aortic thromboembolism is common

KEY POINTS

- Be aware of the poor short- and long-term prognosis
- Most cats will develop future blood clots
- Most cats that survive the initial episode will recover complete function of their affected legs; however, if decreased blood flow and lack of oxygen to the tissues (ischemia) was severe and prolonged, sloughing of parts of the lower legs or persistent nervous system deficits may result
- Most cats that survive the initial episode will be on some type of medication to prevent blood clotting (anticoagulant therapy) and may require frequent reevaluations and an indoor lifestyle

