



Helping Your Cavalier Live a Longer, Healthier Life

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You are to be commended on your desire to know more about your dog's health and how to keep your pet in the best possible condition. You're the kind of pet owner all breeders love to see get their puppies!

Mital Valve Disease. I wish I could give you a protocol for Cavaliers that would allow them to avoid MVD or at least slow its onset. That is the puzzling part of this whole disease - there is no "magic pill". That said, there are a few things you can do that may make a difference.

Early diagnosis is very important. Inform your vet of the strong genetic predisposition of Cavaliers to early-onset MVD. In many breeds, it is something that naturally occurs with old-age -- ours is early-onset. By age five, 50% of Cavaliers will have a MVD murmur; by age 10, nearly all will. Ask him to listen especially carefully by closing the examining room door, turning off any ac/heat blowers etc. If at all possible, take your dog to one of the Heart Clinics which are held at least yearly by one of the four regional CKCSC, USA clubs or a local AKC breed club. It is always preferable to have your dog examined by a board-certified veterinary cardiologist but many communities have none or the cost might well be too much for an owner. Club-sponsored health clinics offer dog owners a convenient, inexpensive way to have their dog examined by board-certified specialists. If your dog is diagnosed with even a very faint murmur, have the heart x-rayed at that time to use as a baseline to monitor later heart enlargement, then x-ray yearly. Watch for any symptoms -- coughing, shortness of breath, enlargement of abdomen, etc. -- and if noticed take your dog to a cardiologist immediately if one is nearby, or at least contact your vet immediately. The dog will most likely be put on medication which can help the dog greatly.

Watching your dog's weight is very important. Cavaliers seem to live for food and would all weigh 50 lbs if given the opportunity. Remember, YOU control obesity in your dog (unless he has learned how to open the refrigerator or can order pizza)! Measure his food and only give treats once a day, and make it a small treat even then.

I have found that **moderate exercise is very important.** The first time our eldest Cavalier developed symptoms of MVD, having had it for 4 years, was when we started

Reprinted with the permission of the author by **Greater Chicago Cavalier Rescue**. The author wrote this in response to a question posed by a member of a Cavalier King Charles Spaniel email list, who wanted to know what he might do to keep his dog healthy. The author has owned seven Cavaliers over the past 22 years, and has bred two litters.

spending part of the year in a one floor apartment. Our other home was a 2-story house and a full flight of stairs from the kitchen to the back garden as well. Just going up and down several times a day made a difference. If you have no stairs, make a serious effort to walk your dog for short distances several times a week in addition to him going outside. It's good for you and it's good for the dog.

Some cardiologists believe that putting the dog on Vasotec at the first diagnosis of MVD may slow the progression of the disease. Unfortunately, research at North Carolina State University has not shown that it is of any benefit. When the time comes to put the dog on **medication**, most likely it will be enalapril which is sold under the trade name of Enacard (for veterinary use) and Vasotec (for humans). They are the exact same medication and enalapril is now available in the generic form. Ask your vet to write you a prescription for 100-10mg tablets of enalapril and call around to various discount pharmacies for the best price. You should be able to find it for under \$20. Then purchase a pill-cutter and cut the 10mg tablets into 1/4's (2.5 mg once or twice @ day is usually the beginning dosage). This makes each 2.5 mg dose cost a HALF A CENT each -- if you buy it from your vet, you may pay as much as \$1.25 EACH. Big difference!

The one thing that has been discovered in the CKCSC,USA/U of Penn Heart Study program is that the age of onset does appear to have a direct correlation to the rapidity of **progression of the disease and the appearance/severity of symptoms**. Dogs who have been regularly examined by a cardiologist and have not shown a murmur until age 5 or 6, and at that time the murmur was only a grade 1 or 2, usually have a slower progression, some NEVER developing symptoms and many living to age 12-14.

The most important factor is whether there is significant **heart enlargement and fluid accumulation**. Dogs with these two side effects don't do very well. Oddly enough, there are dogs with Grades 5 and 6 who do not have significant enlargement and who have no fluid. Those dogs lead a very high-quality life, with considerable longevity.

Right now, we're at the point in our knowledge about MVD that can best be described as being better able to describe "the color of the horse that kicked us"! It does appear that the disease affects more males than females, but that may be a statistical anomaly. It is not a significant enough difference to be the deciding factor in whether or not to get a male or female puppy.

As a pet buyer, the most important guidelines should be to buy a puppy from a breeder who follows the recommended **MVD Breeding Protocol**. The Protocol states that the sire and dam must be cardiologist-clear at age two-and-a-half and THEIR sires and dams must be clear at age five. Epidemiological studies done in the UK and in Sweden have shown that such dogs have a significantly higher age of onset of MVD. This is the goal as MVD is a polygenic trait that cannot be "bred out" the best hope is to raise the age of onset.

As far as **other health checks** go:

1) Have your dog's **hips x-rayed at age 2** and submit those x-rays to the OFA. I know this is a pet and it is spayed/neutered, but it is important to know if a dog has hip dysplasia so you can restrict jumping, do any recommended surgery while she is young, and to inform your breeder of the results. The larger the number of Cavalier hips submitted to the OFA, the better they can predict the incidence of the disease in Cavaliers. The dog DOES

NOT have to be anesthetized to do this! If your own vet won't do it without anesthesia, call around and find one who will. Be sure to submit the x-rays to OFA regardless of whether or not they appear to be clear or dysplastic, and sign the waiver which allows "fails" to be posted on the OFA web site.

2) Have your vet **check yearly for luxating patellae**. This can also be submitted to the OFA and should be. Unlike hips, clear patellae at a particular age do not mean the dog is free of the condition for life. It can appear later although when it does, it is usually as a result of injury, not heredity. There again, if surgery is advised, better it be done while the dog is a young, health candidate for surgery.

3) Have your dog's **eyes examined yearly** by a board-certified veterinary ophthalmologist. There are eye clinics at regional breed club shows, plus your vet probably knows of other clinics sponsored by other local breed clubs (Golden Retriever clubs frequently sponsor them) in which you can participate. The cost is usually much less than an office visit to an ophthalmologist - plus most smaller cities don't even have one. DO submit the examination result form to CERF -- same reason as OFA.

4) If your dog can't put on weight (or can't keep it off), has a poor-quality coat that is thin and dry, has various skin allergies and/or appears cold, ask your vet to do a **thyroid-level test** and send it to Michigan State for evaluation. This can also be submitted to the OFA.

If your pet seems to be "just different" than usual, take him to your vet. It is no different than with knowing one's child; you know your own pet and know if he just doesn't seem "quite right." Your vet should respect your knowledge -- if he doesn't, FIND ANOTHER VET! Very little breed-specific information is taught in veterinary school and your vet should welcome any breed-specific knowledge you can give him. It's an extra plus, if your vet has other Cavaliers in his practice.

KEEP YOUR BREEDER INFORMED of your dog's health throughout his lifetime. Time and again I've heard breeders say "I know what I breed and I don't need to test because I don't have that problem." They can't KNOW if they have a problem unless you tell them -- they personally keep a tiny number of the puppies they produce! Some will welcome this information; some will attack the messenger and accuse you of having done something to cause the condition. Nonetheless, they NEED TO BE TOLD. Don't ask for your money back or attack them, just give them the information.

Sorry this is so long-winded, but these are things that many of us (not all) think are important. None can harm your dog, so they seem worth trying. I'd much rather know I've done all I could have done, than upon the loss of a beloved pet live with many "I wonder if I'd..!!"

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