

Diagnosis of Heart Disease



It can be scary watching your pet show signs of heart trouble, but it's important to know that you're not alone. Heart disease is often complex, and the signs may be subtle or easy to miss. Without the right diagnosis, you risk unnecessary treatments, unanswered questions, and ongoing worry.

That's why Sawgrass Veterinary Cardiology takes the time to get to know you and your pet during your first consultation. This gives us a clear picture of what's happening inside your pet's heart and allows us to create a treatment plan that truly makes a difference.



What To Expect At The First Consultation

Your visit begins with a gentle, pet-centered exam and a conversation about what you've noticed at home. From there, our cardiology team recommends only the tests that are medically relevant for your pet's specific situation.

You'll be part of the process every step of the way. In most cases, you're welcome to stay with your pet during testing, and we explain what we see in real time whenever possible. Most results are discussed before you leave, so you walk out with clarity, confidence, and a clear plan for your pet's care.

This guide gives you an overview of some of the tests we may recommend, why they are important in diagnosing heart disease, and what you can expect during the process.

How We Diagnose Heart Disease



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Echocardiography (Heart Ultrasound)

An echocardiogram is one of the most important tools in veterinary cardiology. It uses ultrasound technology to show the heart beating in real time, giving us a detailed look at:

- The size and thickness of the heart's chambers
- How well the valves are opening and closing
- The pumping motion of the heart muscle
- The direction and speed of blood flow through the heart

This level of insight cannot be obtained from X-rays alone. Echocardiography is critical for diagnosing conditions such as valve disease, dilated or hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, congenital defects, and fluid around the heart (pericardial effusion).

Most pets do not need sedation for this procedure. They are gently positioned on a padded table while a small ultrasound probe is placed against the chest. The test is painless, typically takes 10–15 minutes, and owners are encouraged to stay in the room to watch the process. Results are explained immediately, so you leave with a clear understanding of your pet's heart health and the next steps in their care.



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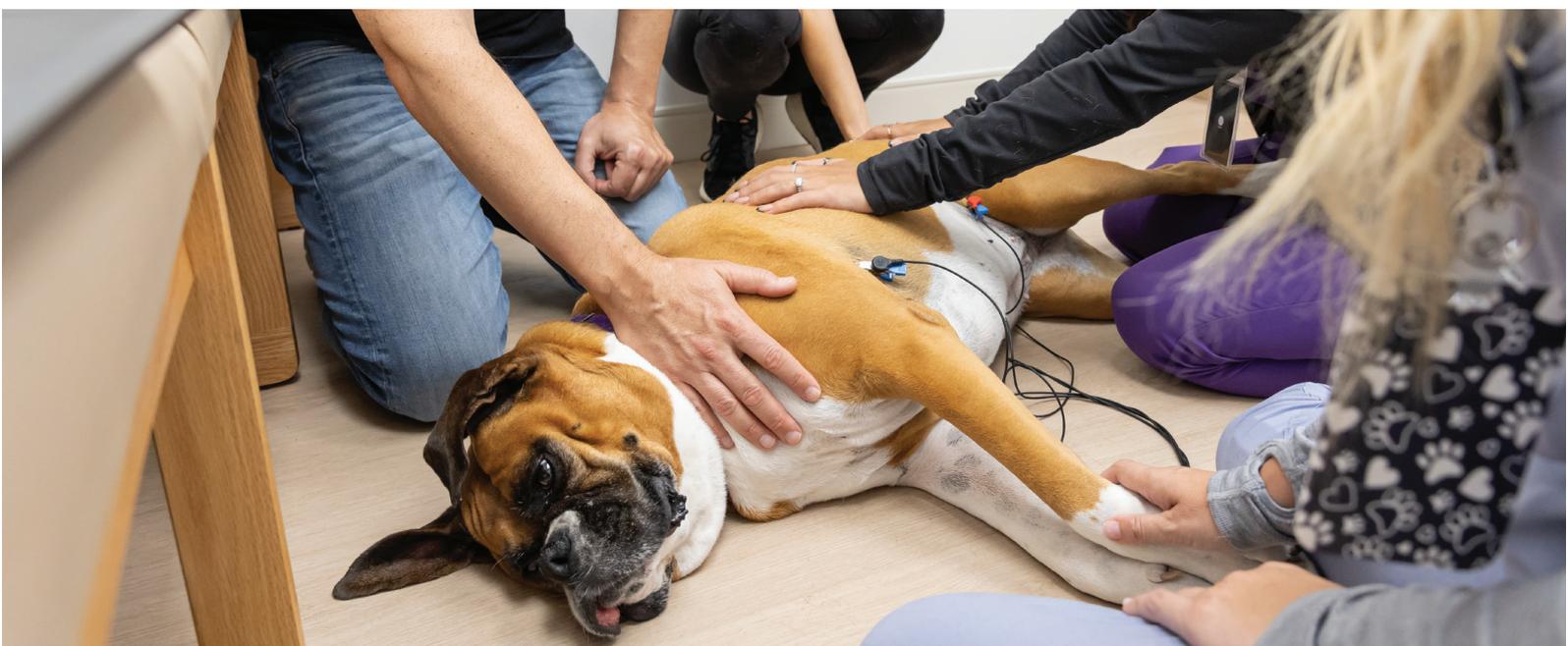
Electrocardiography (ECG/EKG)

The heart's rhythm is controlled by tiny electrical signals that coordinate each heartbeat. An electrocardiogram (ECG or EKG) records these signals, allowing us to evaluate the heart's rate, rhythm, and conduction system. Even when the heart appears normal on an ultrasound or X-ray, electrical disturbances can be present and may pose serious risks if left undetected.

An ECG is especially important if your pet:

- Has fainted or collapsed
- Shows an irregular or unusually fast heartbeat
- Belongs to a breed at higher risk for silent arrhythmias (such as Boxers or Dobermans)
- Is beginning a new heart medication that may affect rhythm

The test is quick, safe, and painless. Your pet rests comfortably on their side while small clips are gently placed on their limbs to record the heart's electrical activity. Sedation is almost never required. Results are interpreted in real time by a board-certified cardiologist, and when more information is needed, extended monitoring with a portable Holter device may be recommended to capture arrhythmias that occur intermittently.



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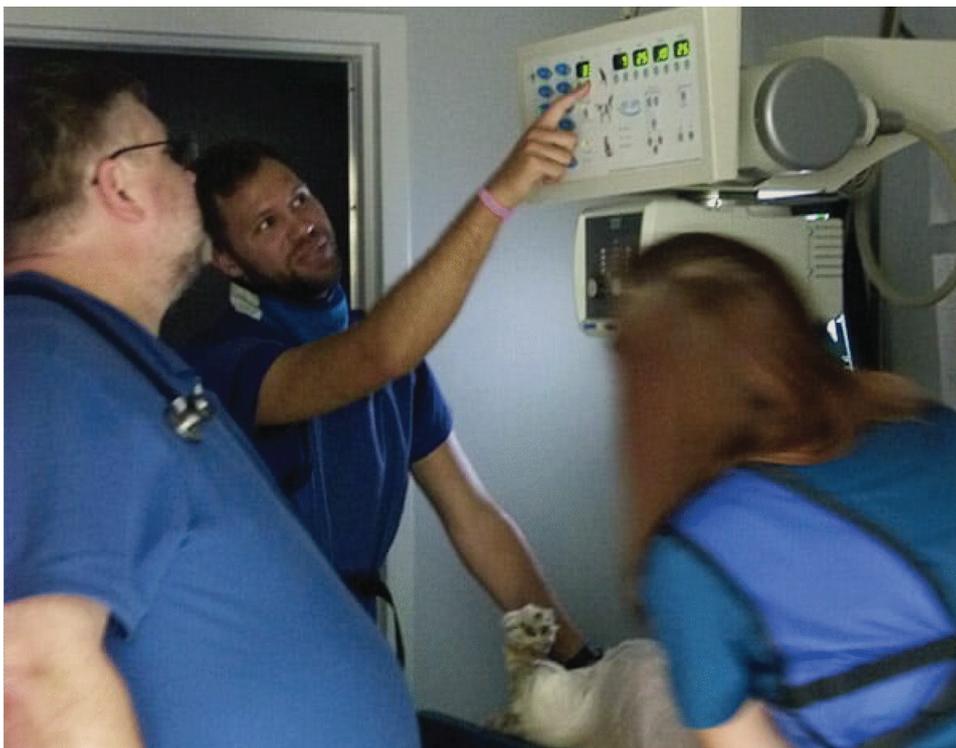
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Radiography (Chest X-Ray)

Radiographs (chest X-rays) provide still images that allow us to assess the size and shape of the heart, the position of major blood vessels, and whether there is fluid in or around the lungs. These details are essential for diagnosing conditions such as congestive heart failure, pulmonary disease, or airway changes that can mimic heart disease.

Unlike an echocardiogram, which shows the heart in motion, radiographs give us a broader view of the entire chest, including the lungs and airways. This makes them an important complementary test when evaluating pets with coughing, breathing difficulties, or suspected heart failure.

For safety reasons, pet owners cannot remain in the X-ray room during the procedure, as radiation requires protective protocols. However, the test is quick, safe, and almost never requires sedation. Our trained team positions your pet carefully to minimize stress while obtaining clear images. Results are reviewed with you the same day, so you can see how the findings contribute to your pet's overall cardiac picture and the next steps in their care.



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Advanced Diagnostics

Some cases require a more detailed picture to confirm a diagnosis, monitor disease progression, or guide treatment. These advanced tools allow us to tailor care more precisely:

- **Blood pressure measurement:** Hypertension can both result from and contribute to heart disease, affecting the heart, kidneys, and eyes. Measuring blood pressure helps us decide if treatment is needed.
- **Cardiac biomarkers (NT-proBNP):** This blood test is taken regularly and tracked over time to measure substances released when the heart muscle is strained. It can help distinguish between heart and lung causes of symptoms like coughing or shortness of breath, as well as gauge our level of control for chronic heart disease.
- **Holter monitoring:** A portable ECG worn for 24 hours or more, ideal for detecting arrhythmias that don't appear during a short clinic test. This is especially important for at-risk breeds or pets with unexplained fainting.
- **Genetic testing:** For certain breeds, inherited cardiac diseases can be identified before signs appear. Early knowledge allows for monitoring and proactive care.
- **Fluoroscopy:** A moving, "live" X-ray that helps evaluate structural heart problems or guide interventional procedures.

Not every pet will need these advanced diagnostics, but when they are recommended, they provide powerful insights that improve accuracy and outcomes.

We believe the best care happens when you're fully informed. At Sawgrass, you're never left guessing - we include you in the process, explain findings clearly, and guide you through next steps so you feel confident about your pet's heart health.

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