

Amiodarone

Amiodarone is an *antiarrhythmic* medication. That is, it is used to treat certain cardiac *arrhythmias*, or abnormalities in the electrical activity of the heart. Antiarrhythmic agents are classified according to specific properties, including the ability to interrupt flow through cell walls of any of three substances (sodium, potassium, or calcium) as well as the blockage of the effects of adrenaline and similar molecules on the heart. Amiodarone is a unique antiarrhythmic agent because it possesses all of these properties.

Due to its physical characteristics and how it is metabolized in the body, it takes much longer for amiodarone to reach its ultimate and steady levels in the bloodstream than for other antiarrhythmic agents. This along with its potential side effects (discussed below), as well as the degree of monitoring necessitated by them, make this drug somewhat cumbersome to use. For these reasons, and because there are other agents which take effect more quickly and are usually effective, amiodarone is not typically chosen as the initial antiarrhythmic medication. However, some arrhythmias prove to be particularly resistant to therapy. In such cases, amiodarone may still succeed where other drugs have failed to control the arrhythmia.

The most common side effects of amiodarone are elevations in liver enzymes and a decrease in function of the thyroid gland. Bloodwork is performed before and periodically after beginning treatment with amiodarone to monitor these values, and to “catch” these problems early if they occur. Fortunately, these abnormalities often resolve once therapy is discontinued. If the effect of amiodarone is greater than expected, heart rate may become abnormally low. Symptoms may include loss of appetite, lethargy, weakness, or fainting. Periodic electrocardiograms are performed to monitor heart rate and to assess response to antiarrhythmic therapy.

Amiodarone should **never** be discontinued suddenly due to the potential for severe “rebound” increases in heart rate and blood pressure. Any change in its administration should be discussed first with a doctor. If any of the above symptoms are noted, or if you have any questions or concerns, please call your veterinarian or Veterinary Specialty Services immediately to discuss an appropriate plan. Problems that are caught early are more easily corrected and less likely to require a visit to the hospital.