

# Heart Murmurs

A heart murmur refers to an abnormal sound that a veterinarian hears when listening to the heart through a stethoscope. It is caused by turbulent blood flow within the heart or its associated blood vessels. Heart murmurs can vary in intensity and are graded on a scale from 1 to 6, with 1 being barely audible and 6 being loudest. However, the loudness does not always correlate directly to the severity of the disease.

Murmurs can be innocent, especially in young animals, or they can be indicative of an underlying heart condition. Further diagnostic tests, such as echocardiography and x-rays, are often used to determine the cause and severity of the murmur and to guide appropriate treatment or monitoring strategies to ensure the well-being of the pets' cardiovascular health.

## WHAT CAUSES A MURMUR?

Heart murmurs are caused by any number of conditions that can create turbulence in the flow of blood through the heart.

### Common causes for heart murmurs include:

- Heart valve deficiencies (the most common cause of heart disease in dogs is Myxomatous Mitral Valve Disease (MMVD)).
- Defects in the heart walls.
- Dilated cardiomyopathy (weakening of the heart muscle walls).
- Hypertrophic cardiomyopathy in cats (thickening of the heart muscle walls); this may be secondary to hyperthyroidism (an overactive thyroid gland).
- Heartworm disease.
- Endocarditis (an infection of the heart valves).
- Tumours.
- Some conditions unrelated to the heart may cause a 'functional murmur' e.g. anaemia and fevers. Pregnancy can also result in a heart murmur.

*Please note that some normal adult cats may have an intermittent heart murmur that shows up when their heart rate is increased due to stress. This type of 'physiologic' murmur disappears when the heart rate is normal and has no impact on the cats' health.*

## HEART MURMURS IN PUPPIES & KITTENS

Occasionally, a heart murmur may be detected in a young puppy or kitten. While this may indicate the presence of a congenital heart condition (a defect that the puppy or kitten was born with), in many cases it is an 'innocent murmur' meaning that it is not related to a heart problem.

Innocent murmurs are low-grade and do not cause any clinical signs, and these murmurs usually disappear by the time the animal is about 4 months of age. If a suspected innocent murmur is still present after this time, then further investigation is strongly recommended. However, if the murmur is suspected to be due to a congenital condition, then referral to a cardiologist for a heart ultrasound is strongly recommended. Some congenital conditions require surgery or intensive medical management from an early age, and a rapid diagnosis can improve the quality of life and longevity of the pet.

### RECOMMENDATION IF A HEART MURMUR HAS BEEN DETECTED TODAY:

- Revisit examination at 4 months old.
- Immediate referral for echocardiogram (echo).

## DIAGNOSTIC TESTS FOR HEART MURMURS

Depending on what other clinical signs are present in your pet, we may recommend x-rays, an electrocardiogram (ECG), and/or an ultrasound examination of the heart (echocardiogram).

If we suspect that the heart murmur is secondary to another disease, blood tests or other tests might be recommended; for example checking the thyroid levels via a blood test in cats with suspected hypertrophic cardiomyopathy.

Blood pressure testing may also be recommended.



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**Recommendation for your pet:**

- Chest x-rays    
  ECG    
  Echo    
  Blood tests    
  Blood pressure test

**SIGNS OF A HEART CONDITION**

Not all pets with a heart condition show outward signs. However, if you have been told that your pet has a heart murmur, you should watch for signs.

**Common signs of a heart condition include:**

- Coughing.
- Difficult or rapid breathing.
- Congestion or ‘noisy’ breathing.
- Reluctance to exercise.
- Weakness or lethargy.
- Fainting episodes.
- Grey, pale or blue gums.
- Abdominal distension (a ‘pot-bellied’ appearance).
- Collapse.

**If your pet displays any of these signs, please contact us immediately!**

**HOW ARE HEART MURMURS TREATED?**

Treatment depends on the cause of the heart murmur and your pets’ condition. If the murmur is caused by a congenital condition, surgery may be recommended. However, if the heart murmur is caused by an underlying problem, the treatment plan will be based on the diagnosis and may include a combination of medications, specialised diets and supportive care. In these cases, the heart murmur may remain, but medications can help make your pet more comfortable and improve their longevity.

**MEDICATION DISPENSED TODAY (SEE MEDICATION LABEL FOR INSTRUCTIONS):**


**SLEEPING RESPIRATORY RATE MONITORING**

Sleeping respiratory rate (SRR) monitoring is very important to help detect early signs of congestive heart failure. This is achieved by counting the number of breaths the pet takes over one minute.

**How to monitor:**

1. One breath = one full intake and exhalation of air.
2. Watch for the animals’ chest to rise once and fall once to count one breath.
3. When measuring, your pet should be asleep in a cool place and not dreaming.
4. Do not touch or otherwise disturb your pet while counting.
5. If SRR is consistently over 30 breaths per minute, contact the clinic.

DATE	SRR	DATE	SRR	DATE	SRR	DATE	SRR

**PROGRESS EXAMINATION REQUIRED:** Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Time: \_\_\_\_\_



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