

HEART MURMURS IN DOGS AND CATS

A heart murmur is an abnormal sound made by the beating heart and detected by a veterinarian listening to the heartbeat with a stethoscope.

In animals, as in people, heart murmurs may be individual traits of no concern ("nonpathological", "functional", "benign", or "innocent" murmurs) that are heard in otherwise healthy dogs and cats, or they may represent the first sign of heart disease ("pathological murmurs").

Heart murmurs most often are first detected in a dog or a cat that otherwise seems well. Therefore, the veterinarian needs to determine whether the heart murmur is unimportant or whether it should be looked into further.

Whether the murmur is *nonpathological* or *pathological* can be determined in some cases simply by the way the murmur sounds. If so, the veterinarian can immediately explain the implications of the murmur just by listening to it, and whether concern is warranted.

In many cases, though, auscultation (listening with a stethoscope) alone cannot allow differentiation between nonpathological murmurs and pathological murmurs. If uncertainty exists, veterinarians can recommend having the heart murmur investigated further: a second opinion with a veterinary cardiologist, X-rays of the heart and chest, a cardiac ultrasound exam, and/or heart-specific blood tests are important ways of doing this. The veterinarian can explain whether any of these approaches is necessary for a given dog or cat.

Overall, a murmur by itself is not a problem, but it can be a clue in some dogs and cats that there is an underlying heart condition. It is the veterinarian's responsibility to determine whether the cause of the murmur is likely harmless (no further attention is needed), whether it is likely significant, or whether it could be either and should be looked into further.

TESTS FOR HEART MURMURS



Second opinion by a veterinary cardiologist

- Expert opinion
- Can provide final answer, or may warrant cardiac tests



X-rays of the chest ("thoracic radiographs")

- Noninvasive
- Shows outline of the heart but not inside the heart
- Shows the lungs and the surroundings of the heart



Echocardiogram (ultrasound of the heart)

- Noninvasive
- Cardiologist sees the internal structure and function of the heart, normal and abnormal blood flow, etc.



Blood tests

- Minimally invasive
- Blood sampling can be done at virtually any veterinary hospital or clinic