Client information sheet


Posted online with the article at: avmajournals.avma.org.

This supplemental document has not undergone peer review.
Heart murmurs in dogs and cats: an overview in everyday terms

E Côté, NJ Edwards, SJ Ettinger, VL Fuentes, KA MacDonald, BA Scansen, DD Sisson, JA Abbott.
For the Working Group of the American College of Veterinary Internal Medicine Specialty of Cardiology on Incidentally Detected Heart Murmurs.

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", “innocent”, or "benign" murmurs) that are heard in otherwise healthy dogs and cats, or they may represent the first sign of heart disease ("pathological" murmurs).

Often, heart murmurs 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 determine the implications of the murmur, and whether it is a cause for concern, just by listening to it.

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 from a veterinary cardiologist, radiography (“x-ray”) of the heart and lungs, echocardiography (cardiac ultrasound examination), and 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 in some dogs and cats, it can be a clue that there is an underlying heart condition. The veterinarian can determine whether the cause of the murmur is likely to be harmless (with no further attention needed) or medically important, and whether further tests are needed.
Tests for heart murmurs

Second opinion by a veterinary cardiologist
- Expert opinion
- Can provide a final answer, or may suggest cardiac tests

Thoracic radiographs ("x-rays" of the chest)
- 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

Veterinary cardiologist listings—US and Canada: www.acvim.org  Europe: www.ecvim-ca.org