

Mountain Vista Veterinary Hospital

Heart Murmurs and Your Pet

What is a heart murmur?

A heart murmur is an abnormal heart sound that is heard with a stethoscope when listening to your pet's heart. Heart murmurs are diagnosed when you bring your pet in for a physical exam.

At what age can a pet have a heart murmur?

Heart murmurs can be diagnosed in puppies or kittens, or can develop as your pet ages.

What causes a heart murmur?

A heart murmur is usually produced as the result of turbulent blood flow or very fast flow through a narrowed blood vessel or channel. In young patients, congenital disease or abnormalities in the heart that your pet is born with is often the cause. In older patients, changes in structure of heart valves or changes in the heart can produce a heart murmur.

What is an innocent heart murmur?

An innocent heart murmur is one that is diagnosed in a puppy or kitten in which there is no easily recognized cause. Innocent heart murmurs usually disappear by 6 months of age and never cause a problem in pets.

What is a physiologic heart murmur?

This is a type of heart murmur in which heart disease is not the underlying cause. These are commonly diagnosed in cats, and sometimes in dogs, where high heart rates produce a murmur. Sometimes heart murmurs can be produced in disease conditions, such as patients with anemia (a low red blood cell count).

Can you tell from the sound of the murmur if a patient has serious heart disease?

There are different types of heart murmurs and different intensities that can be heard. Sometimes the type of the heart murmur can give us some clues as to what is going on, but in most cases other tests need to be run to determine the exact cause and the significance of the murmur.

What tests are recommended to investigate a heart murmur?

There are several tests that may be recommended:

Chest X-rays - used to evaluate the size of the heart and look for abnormalities in the lungs such as fluid or tumours

Echocardiogram - special type of heart ultrasound that is used in most cases to definitively determine the cause of the murmur as well as determine heart function

Electrocardiogram (ECG) - measures electrical activity of the heart to see if the heart muscle is conducting properly. Often run where there are certain heart diseases suspected or if the heart is beating irregularly

Blood tests - there are some blood tests that are recommended that can help screen for heart disease. Blood tests are also used to rule out diseases that can affect the heart and to monitor the blood when heart medications are prescribed

Blood Pressure - there are many disease that can cause an elevated blood pressure (or hypertension) in our pets. These can affect the heart and therefore a blood pressure measurement is recommended in patients with heart disease to help manage the disease.

My pet has a heart murmur, should I be worried?

It is important to understand that not all pet's with heart murmurs have serious disease and many will live long normal lives with their heart murmur. It is important, however, to try and determine the cause of the heart murmur in your pet to see if early intervention is required.

My pet has a heart murmur but needs to undergo general anesthesia for surgery or dental disease, should I be concerned?

The presence of a heart murmur DOES NOT mean your pet is at increased risk for anesthesia unless there is serious disease causing the heart murmur. This is where important tests such as chest x-rays and an echocardiogram (heart ultrasound) are needed to determine if there is risk.

Can I have these special tests performed at Mountain Vista Veterinary Hospital or do I need to be referred to a veterinary cardiologist?

We are fortunate to be able to offer heart testing including echocardiogram services at our hospital. If needed, we are also able to communicate with board certified veterinary cardiologists via telemedicine where they can review the tests we perform here and make a diagnosis and treatment recommendations if needed. They can also help determine anesthetic risks, if there are any. Referrals to a veterinary cardiologist are also possible if your pet needs more specialized care.

What are clinical signs of heart disease in my pet?

Coughing, especially at night, lack of energy while exercising, fainting or collapsing episodes and poor appetite can sometimes be seen with clinically significant heart disease. Having an increased respiratory rate while your pet is sleeping may also indicate a problem. It is important to realize that these symptoms can be seen in other disease processes and therefore heart tests are warranted to rule in or rule out heart disease.

How do I measure Sleeping Respiratory Rate SRR in my pet?

Your pet should be at rest or sleeping. Count the number of times your pet's belly or chest moves in and out with each breathe in a 60 second period. The number of breathes in this period is known as your pet's SRR. Rates greater than 30-40 breathes/minute warrant further investigation.

Can heart disease be treated?

Some forms of heart disease require no treatment at all. Many patients with a heart murmur do not require any treatment. Other forms only need treatment once they reach a certain stage. Staging of heart disease is only determined by running tests such as chest x-rays and an echocardiogram. There is no cure for most heart diseases but new treatments are available that have been shown to prolong the quality and quantity of life for many patients with heart disease.

More questions?

Please do not hesitate to call the office at 705 446-0261 or e-mail us at reception@mvvh.ca