



Heart Disease & Echo FAQ

Heart Murmur: Innocent vs. Pathologic?

A heart murmur is an extra heart sound that the doctor hears during auscultation (listening to the heart with a stethoscope). It sounds like a “shooshing” sound in addition to the normal “lub-dub” sound of the heart. There are 6 different sound grades of heart murmurs that describe the loudness of the murmur; 1 being the quietest, and 6 being the absolute loudest. Most cat heart murmurs range from 1 to 3 out of 6. However, louder doesn’t always mean worse.

Cats can have heart murmurs for a few different reasons. A cat can develop a heart murmur while under stress (like at the vet clinic). As the cat’s blood pressure rises, the blood flow starts to become turbulent, which causes the doctor to hear a murmur. When the cat calms back down again, the murmur will usually disappear. This is considered an “innocent” murmur, meaning there is no heart disease present.

Changes in the walls or chambers of the heart can change the orientation of the heart valves, causing backflow or turbulent blood flow through valves, which the doctor hears as a heart murmur. This is considered a “pathologic” murmur, meaning there is heart disease present.

How can you tell the difference between an innocent and pathologic murmur?

There is no way to tell the difference between an innocent and pathologic murmur by listening to the heart alone. Both types of murmurs sound exactly the same. The only way to diagnose whether or not the murmur is innocent or pathologic is by performing an ultrasound on the heart, called an echocardiogram.

Is a heart murmur always present if the cat has heart disease?

No. Heart disease can be present, and the cat can be completely asymptomatic (not showing any signs) and may not have a murmur. If we suspect a cat may be at higher risk of heart disease, an echocardiogram will be recommended.

How do I know if my cat is at increased risk of heart disease?

Young, male cats are most commonly affected. Especially larger cats, and cats of specific breeds, including Maine Coons, Ragdolls, American Shorthairs, and Persians. If you have a cat of any of these breeds, it is prudent to have a screening echocardiogram done to make sure there are no abnormalities. Catching heart disease early plays a large role in the treatment course. Also, if your doctor hears a heart murmur, an echocardiogram should be done to rule out heart disease, especially before any general anesthesia is performed.

What is involved in an echocardiogram?

Echocardiogram is a fancy name for a heart ultrasound. It is completely non-invasive, and the cat will not need to be sedated. The cat will be held on its side with the doctor applying ultrasound gel to the chest area. Then the cardiologist will use the ultrasound probe to visualize the heart and take measurements. The whole process takes about 10 minutes, depending on how still the cat lays.

What does an echocardiogram measure, and how is a diagnosis made?

By ultrasounding the heart, the cardiologist will be able to measure wall thicknesses, chamber dimensions, valve function, blood flow, and heart function. These numbers will tell us if the cat’s heart measures and functions within normal ranges.

What is the most common heart disease in cats, and how is it managed?

The most common heart disease of cats is **hypertrophic cardiomyopathy (HCM)**, which simply means, abnormal growth/thickening of the heart muscle. It is a quickly progressing disease in most cases. Most times, medication is recommended to slow the process, and follow-up echocardiograms will be needed to monitor the disease’s progress. Cats with HCM can live for many years if the disease is caught early, managed properly, and re-evaluated regularly.