

# Heart Murmurs in Dogs and Cats: What They Mean for Your Pet

Hearing that your pet has a **heart murmur** can sound alarming, but it's important to know that a murmur isn't a diagnosis on its own — it's simply a **sound** your veterinarian hears when listening to your pet's heart.

Some murmurs are harmless, while others may indicate **underlying heart disease** that needs monitoring or treatment. Understanding what a heart murmur means can help you make the best decisions for your pet's health.

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## What Is a Heart Murmur?

A **heart murmur** is an **abnormal “whooshing” or “swishing” sound** heard during a heartbeat. Normally, the heart makes two clear sounds — “lub-dub” — as the valves open and close. A murmur occurs when there is **turbulent blood flow** within or near the heart.

This turbulence can happen for several reasons:

- A valve isn't closing properly
  - Blood is flowing through a narrowed area
  - There's a small hole or defect in the heart wall
  - Or the blood is thinner than normal (for example, from anemia)
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## How Are Heart Murmurs Found?

Most murmurs are discovered during a **routine veterinary exam** when your vet listens to your pet's heart with a stethoscope.

If a murmur is heard, your veterinarian will describe it based on:

- **Grade (loudness):** from 1 (very soft) to 6 (very loud)
- **Timing:** when it occurs during the heartbeat

- **Location:** where it's best heard on the chest

These details help determine whether the murmur might be **innocent (benign)** or possibly related to **heart disease**.

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## Innocent (Benign) Heart Murmurs

Some heart murmurs aren't associated with any disease at all.

These "**innocent**" murmurs are often:

- Found in **young puppies or kittens**, especially under 6 months old
- Caused by rapid blood flow through a healthy heart
- **Soft (low-grade)** and often disappear as the pet grows

No treatment is needed for these murmurs, though your veterinarian may recommend follow-up exams to be sure the murmur resolves.

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## Pathologic (Abnormal) Heart Murmurs

Other murmurs may signal **underlying heart disease** or a structural problem.

In dogs and cats, common causes include:

### In Dogs:

- **Degenerative mitral valve disease (DMVD):**  
Very common in small or older dogs; the valve between heart chambers becomes leaky, causing blood to flow backward.
- **Dilated cardiomyopathy (DCM):**  
The heart muscle becomes weak and enlarged, more common in large breeds like Dobermans or Great Danes.
- **Congenital defects:**  
Such as narrow valves or small holes in the heart, often found in puppies.

### In Cats:

- **Hypertrophic cardiomyopathy (HCM):**  
The most common feline heart disease — the heart muscle thickens, making it harder to pump blood.
  - **Congenital heart defects:**  
Present from birth and sometimes detected in kittens.
  - Occasionally, a murmur in cats may occur **without heart disease**, requiring further testing to determine the cause.
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## Signs That a Murmur May Be Causing Problems

A mild murmur alone doesn't always cause symptoms. But if heart disease is present, you might notice:

- **Coughing**
- **Difficulty breathing or rapid breathing**
- **Fatigue or exercise intolerance**
- **Fainting or collapsing**
- **Weight loss or poor appetite**
- **Swollen belly (fluid buildup)**

If you see any of these signs, contact your veterinarian right away.

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## How Is a Heart Murmur Evaluated?

If your veterinarian suspects that the murmur may be significant, they may recommend further testing, such as:

- **Chest X-rays:** To check heart size and look for fluid in the lungs
- **Echocardiogram (ultrasound of the heart):** To visualize heart structure and function — the *gold standard* test for diagnosing heart disease

- **Electrocardiogram (ECG):** To assess heart rhythm
- **Blood pressure measurement and lab tests:** To evaluate overall health

These tests help determine whether your pet needs medication, monitoring, or further evaluation by a **veterinary cardiologist**.

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## Treatment and Management

Treatment depends on the **underlying cause** of the murmur.

- **Benign murmurs:** No treatment, just periodic check-ups
- **Valve disease or cardiomyopathy:** Medications may be prescribed to help the heart pump more effectively, control blood pressure, or remove excess fluid
- **Congenital defects:** Some may be surgically correctable; others are managed medically

Your veterinarian will create a **custom plan** for your pet based on test results and symptoms. Regular follow-up exams are key to tracking any changes over time.

### Monitoring at Home: Measuring Resting Respiratory Rate

One of the most useful ways to monitor your pet's heart health at home is by measuring their **resting respiratory rate (RRR)** — the number of breaths per minute when they're **asleep or completely relaxed**.

Here's how to do it:

1. **Wait until your pet is sleeping or resting quietly** (not dreaming or panting).
2. **Watch their chest** — one rise and fall equals **one breath**.
3. **Count the number of breaths in 15 seconds**, then multiply by 4 to get the breaths per minute.
  - Example: 6 breaths in 15 seconds  $\times 4 = 24$  breaths per minute
4. **Record the result** and check it a few times per week.

5. **Notify your veterinarian if:**

- Your dog's resting rate is **over 30 breaths per minute**
- Your cat's resting rate is **over 35 breaths per minute**,
- Or if you notice the number steadily increasing from your pet's normal baseline.

A rising or consistently high resting respiratory rate can be an **early sign of fluid buildup** in the lungs, and catching it early allows your veterinarian to adjust medications before breathing difficulty develops.

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## **Living with a Pet Who Has a Heart Murmur**

Many pets with heart murmurs — even those with heart disease — can live **happy, active lives** for years with proper care and monitoring.

Here are some tips:

- Give medications exactly as prescribed
  - Watch for changes in breathing, energy, or appetite
  - Keep your pet at a healthy weight
  - Feed a **veterinarian-recommended diet** (some heart conditions benefit from specific nutrition)
  - Measure your pet's **resting respiratory rate** regularly
  - Schedule **regular check-ups and follow-up imaging** as advised
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A heart murmur in your dog or cat is **a clue, not a crisis**.

While some murmurs are harmless, others can indicate treatable heart disease — and the earlier it's found, the better your pet's outcome.

With modern diagnostics, medication, and at-home monitoring, pets with murmurs can enjoy long, comfortable lives under your veterinarian's guidance.