



# Heart murmurs

Advice for adopters



## Who is this handout for?

This handout is for those considering adopting a cat that has been diagnosed with a heart murmur.

Cats Protection frequently faces the dilemma of when to fund the costs of diagnostic tests for cats in our care where heart murmurs have been detected. Heart murmurs are common in cats and the costs of testing can markedly increase the costs associated with our rehoming work.

## What are heart murmurs?

A heart murmur means that in addition to normal 'lub-dub' heart sounds, the vet can also hear extra sounds when listening to the heart with a stethoscope. This is due to the blood moving in a different way through the heart or its major blood vessels. Heart murmurs are very common in cats. One study showed that around one third of cats have a heart murmur.

Although a murmur may signify a problem with the heart or its blood vessels, around one half of healthy cats with a heart murmur don't have any underlying heart disease and of those that do, many live quite normally without ever developing any signs of that disease. Conversely, a number of cats who do have significant heart disease do not have a heart murmur, meaning that many cases of heart disease remain undetected.

To further complicate matters, heart murmurs in cats can come and go. Some may be heard on one day, but not the next. They may be heard when the cat is stressed and the heart rate has increased but be gone a few minutes later when the cat has calmed down. They are graded according to their intensity, usually from one to six with one being very quiet and six being loud, but the grade can also change. Loud murmurs are more often associated with significant heart disease. Other cats may have a murmur because of other disease that is not related to the heart, such as hyperthyroidism, high blood pressure or anaemia.

Therefore, on its own, a murmur is not a reliable indicator of heart disease or function (or indeed other disease) and is a very common finding in many normal, healthy cats.

## When does Cats Protection carry out further testing when a heart murmur is found?

We aim to use available funds to detect cats most at risk of severe heart disease, without putting many cats through tests which may not be of benefit to them. Time in care is often stressful for cats, and additional investigations can add to this stress, as well as extending time in care.

Cats Protection currently recommends further investigation for cats in our care who are most at risk of developing clinical signs of heart disease. This includes cats with:

- an arrhythmia (abnormal rhythm of the heartbeat detected by the vet)
- a 'gallop' (a specific sound of the heartbeat detected by the vet)
- a persistent heart murmur of grade 4/6, 5/6 or 6/6

## Which cats will not be tested?

In most cases, Cats Protection doesn't fund further heart investigations for a cat in our care where a heart murmur of grade 1/6 to 3/6 has been detected, if the cat has no clinical signs of heart disease and has no arrhythmia or gallop. Other tests may have been carried out, dependent on clinical signs and the vet's clinical judgement, to rule out other non-heart causes of murmurs, such as blood pressure checks and/or tests for hyperthyroidism or anaemia.

## **What about heart blood tests?**

More recently 'heart blood tests' (NT-ProBNP tests) have become available which may be useful to identify when further investigation (such as a heart scan) may be warranted. However, these tests aren't 100% accurate, they may miss cats who have heart disease and result in some cats without significant heart disease undergoing heart scans. These tests have cost implications while not providing a diagnosis and therefore Cats Protection does not perform these blood tests prior to rehoming a cat.

## **Can cats with heart murmurs be insured against heart disease?**

In general, cats that have a pre-existing heart murmur will not be covered by pet insurance for future medical problems relating to their heart. It is advisable to confirm the level of insurance offered to your cat with your pet insurance company upon taking out a policy, as any exclusions placed on the policy will vary for each individual. Cats Protection recommends that all cats are covered by pet insurance, regardless of certain exclusions.

## **What if the cat I want to adopt has a murmur but has not received a scan?**

In this situation, we would advise that a heart murmur has been detected. However, the cause of the murmur is unknown and therefore whether the murmur is a sign of heart disease, and if this will cause the cat a problem, is also unknown.

We would recommend discussing with your vet about whether to carry out further investigations.

## **What information is available about cats who have had a heart scan?**

Cats that have met the criteria to have their heart murmur investigated while in Cats Protection care will have received a heart scan (ultrasound) to assess the function of their heart prior to adoption. The findings will be summarised in a report by the vet and will form part of the medical records for the cat.

## **The cat I want to adopt has been diagnosed with hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, what does this mean?**

Hypertrophic cardiomyopathy (HCM) is the most common form of heart disease in cats, and is diagnosed when there is thickening of the heart muscle, seen on a scan of the heart. It is a very common condition in cats, and often causes no symptoms at all. If the disease becomes severe enough, it can affect the way the blood moves through the heart and cause symptoms of heart failure. However, where mild changes are found on the heart scan, there is no way to predict when or if the cat will ever go into heart failure; many cats will have some thickening of their heart, but live long and happy lives and the heart disease may never progress enough to cause signs.

Monitoring is often advised for cats with known hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, which may involve a yearly scan. However we would advise you talk to your vet and decide what is right for both you and your cat. Any conditions relating to the heart, and monitoring, are unlikely to be covered by insurance.



[cats.org.uk](https://cats.org.uk)

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