



# Heart Murmurs in Dogs

Discovering your dog has got a heart murmur can sometimes be a real shock. You may have many questions that need answering, from what is a heart murmur to how is it best treated. This leaflet aims to answer some of your questions and help you to better understand your dog's condition.

## What is a heart murmur?

A heart murmur is an abnormal sound that may be heard with a stethoscope. Instead of the usual dub-dub sound, a whooshing of varying intensity may be audible.



## What causes a heart murmur?

Heart murmurs may be present at birth (congenital) or develop with age (acquired). Certain breeds, such as Cavalier King Charles Spaniels are prone to murmurs due to leakage from one of the valves. Valves keep blood flowing in the correct direction, however sometimes they can become weakened, allowing a small jet of blood to flow the wrong way, causing the whooshing noise we hear. Weakened valves are the most common cause of heart murmurs; however abnormalities with the blood vessels leaving the heart, or changes with the heart muscle itself can also cause a murmur to develop.



## How can we tell what is causing the murmur?

The best way to evaluate a murmur is to perform an ultrasound scan of the heart. This allows us to look directly at the heart muscle, as well as viewing the valves and any areas of turbulent blood. Available at Drove Hospital, this technique is tolerated by most dogs without any sedation.

## Do all murmurs mean heart disease?

Not all dogs with heart murmurs go on to develop clinical signs of heart disease. Hearing a murmur means your dog may have, or is at increased risk of developing heart problems later in life. It is important to keep any dog with a heart murmur at their ideal weight, and provide them with a healthy diet and adequate exercise to keep them fit.

## What are the signs of heart disease?

Clinical signs may vary between animals depending on the cause of the murmur and any other factors affecting their health. Symptoms to be aware of include slowing down on walks, increased breathing rate and panting more, intermittent coughing and sometimes a swollen abdomen. Many other diseases can present in a similar way so if you think your pet may have any of these signs, please book an appointment for a full physical examination.

Eventually dogs may develop breathing difficulties due to pulmonary oedema (fluid accumulation within the lungs). This is because the heart cannot cope with all the blood it has to pump around the body, therefore the pressure builds up and fluid leaks into the lungs. Occasionally this fluid builds up in the abdomen instead, causing a pot-bellied appearance.

## How is heart disease investigated?

It is important to determine whether clinical signs are due to heart or lung disease, as the symptoms are similar but the treatments differ. A chest X-ray is the best way to investigate. This may require a mild sedative but it is a valuable diagnostic tool.

Once we know a heart condition is causing the signs, we can look at the heart directly by performing an ultrasound scan, as mentioned above. This can determine what part of the heart is causing the problem, and help target our treatment.



## How do you treat heart disease?

Unfortunately heart disease cannot be cured so requires life-long medication. The heart is kept finely tuned by numerous hormones and chemicals. The medications we use mimic these, so we are often able to improve clinical signs, allowing your dog to continue to lead an active life. As every dog is individual, regular check-ups are essential to monitor progress and check for relapse.

Depending on the severity of clinical signs at presentation, your dog may need to be admitted to Drove Hospital for oxygen, investigation and stabilisation. If caught early, many dogs can be treated as out-patients, just visiting the hospital for X-rays and an ultrasound scan.

Not all treatment is medical – weight loss in obese animals is essential to help your dog cope with a heart condition.

Medications available include diuretics (also known as ‘water tablets’) to help the body clear excess fluid. Other tablets are available to help the heart pump more efficiently, and to help the blood vessels dilate, reducing the force needed to push the blood around the body.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any further questions or concerns.

