

Heart Murmur Tips

Dr. Ford Bell, a veterinary oncologist well known for doing oncology rounds at the University of Minnesota Veterinary Teaching Hospital, back in my day, always said, “a mass is not meant to be watched”. I would like to impart the same wisdom in regards to heart murmurs. They are a distinct flag on our physical exam that should not be overlooked. One possible exception to that rule would be a puppy that has a soft murmur in the left basilar region that is not intended for breeding. Monitoring the murmur over the first 4 months of age is appropriate. If it persists past that point, further diagnostic testing should be recommended to include thoracic radiographs +/- an echocardiogram. Here are some tips:

- 1) A heart murmur is not a diagnosis. It is a physical exam finding that warrants additional diagnostic testing to obtain a diagnosis, stage the condition, assess prognosis and to create a care plan moving forward.
- 2) The grade of the heart murmur does not always correlate with severity of disease. Dogs with chronic degenerative valve disease can have a grade 5 murmur associated with early disease and those with a grade 3 may have severe disease.
- 3) Therapy recommendations should not be based on a heart murmur alone. A diagnosis must be obtained. Not all conditions associated with a heart murmur need therapy. In fact, not all heart murmurs are associated with primary heart disease. Other factors such as anemia and fever can also cause a murmur.
- 4) There are some congenital heart conditions that are not always associated with a heart murmur such as mild subaortic stenosis and tricupsid valve dysplasia. Therefore, breeds predisposed to these conditions need to be screened with an echocardiogram to rule out the condition.
- 5) Roughly 50% of cats with heart murmurs have primary heart disease with the other 50% having benign physiologic murmurs that are not associated with primary heart disease. Thoracic radiographs can be completely normal in cats with significant heart disease. Therefore, if a heart murmur is heard in a cat, an echocardiogram is indicated.

Early detection of heart disease is key. Ruling out heart disease can be just as important. So talk to your clients about murmurs and the diagnostic steps needed to get answers. If you ever have questions, feel free to contact Veterinary Cardiology Specialists.