



Heart murmurs – advice for adopters

Who is this handout for? This handout is for those considering adoption of a cat that has been diagnosed with a heart murmur. The adopter will have been advised of the presence of the murmur.

Cats Protection frequently faces the dilemma of when to fund the costs of diagnostic tests for cats in its care where heart murmurs have been detected. Heart murmurs are common in cats and the costs of screening can markedly increase the costs associated with 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. Heart murmurs are very common in cats. A recent 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 1 to 6 with 1 being very quiet and 6 being loud, but the grade can also change on a daily basis. Furthermore, the grade of murmur heard may not necessarily correlate with the severity of any heart disease if present. For example, some cats may have a grade 4 out of 6 heart murmurs, but no heart disease at all. Other cats may have a murmur because of other disease that is not related to the heart at all, 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 should further tests be undertaken?

We acknowledge that many of the cats in the care of Cats Protection will be experiencing a high level of stress in their new environment away from the familiarity of home. Extensive veterinary investigations are not only a financial concern; they are also a welfare concern. Causing additional stress to the cats in our care in pursuing further investigations must be carefully weighed up from a cost vs benefit perspective. Additional testing of cats can also add to the time the cat must spend in rescue care before rehoming, which can also negatively impact the welfare of the cat.

Cats Protection's Veterinary Department currently recommends that Cats Protection branches and adoption centres consider funding further heart work up for cats in Cats Protection's care **with clinical signs of heart disease**. Where funds allow, we will also investigate those cats and kittens which show no clinical signs of heart disease but have:

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

Which cats will not be tested?

It is generally recommended **not** to fund further heart investigations for a cat in Cats Protection's care where a heart murmur of grade 1/6 to 4/6 has been detected, if the cat has no clinical signs of heart disease and has no arrhythmia or gallop. Other tests may be indicated, 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 the new heart blood tests?

More recently 'heart blood tests' (NT-ProBNP tests) have become available which may be a useful screen to further identify when further investigation (such as a heart scan) may be most appropriate in those cats with a murmur of grade 1/6 to 4/6 and with no signs of heart disease, to pick up those most at risk of having underlying disease. However, such tests are still an additional financial burden to the charity and their routine use in these situations is generally not recommended at this stage.

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 advice is given to owners who have adopted a cat with a murmur when this has been investigated?

Cats that have met the criteria to have their heart murmur investigated while in Cats Protection's 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.

What advice is given to owners who have adopted a cat with a murmur when this has not been investigated?

Potential owners must be made fully aware when adopting such cats that:

- a heart murmur has been detected, and
- that the cause of the murmur is unknown and
- the prognosis for the cat is unknown

It would then be up to the owner to decide whether to undertake and fund further investigations in consultation with their own vet.