

Heart Murmur

What is a heart murmur?

A heart murmur is a sound that occurs between beats of the heart. The sound is made by blood flowing through the heart. It is similar to the sound water makes as it flows through a hose. A heart murmur does not necessarily mean that there is something wrong with the heart.

How does it occur?

Murmurs can result from:

- the shape of the heart
- abnormal heart structures, such as the valves or heart walls, which you may have had since birth
- damaged or overworked heart valves resulting from medical problems such as rheumatic fever, heart attacks, infective endocarditis.

When your heart beats faster, it changes the rate and amount of blood moving through your heart. This can cause heart murmurs. Some of the conditions that can cause your heart to beat faster are:

- anemia
- high blood pressure
- pregnancy
- fever
- stress
- thyroid problems.

Most heart murmurs are heard in people with normal hearts. These innocent heart murmurs - also called functional, normal, vibratory, or physiologic murmurs - are harmless. They are common in children. Most murmurs go away for good as a child nears adulthood.

What are the symptoms?

Innocent heart murmurs do not cause any symptoms. If you have a heart problem that is causing the murmur, possible symptoms of a heart problem are:

- shortness of breath
- lightheadedness
- decreased ability to exert yourself, for example, during activities such as climbing the stairs or even making a bed
- frequent experiences of a rapid heart rate
- chest pain.

Heart problems that cause heart murmurs may not cause any other symptoms for many years.

How is it diagnosed?

A heart murmur is usually discovered when your healthcare provider listens to your heart with a stethoscope. The following tests may be done to look for the cause of the murmur:

- An electrocardiogram, which records the heart's electrical activity.
- A chest X-ray to look for an enlarged heart, signs of heart muscle failure, and birth defects.
- An echocardiogram, which uses sound waves to create images of the heart structure. The images may show a hole in the wall of the heart or an abnormal valve.
- Cardiac catheterization, which uses dye injected through a thin tube and into your heart so that your healthcare provider can see the blood vessels or chambers of your heart on X-ray film. This procedure also allows measurement of the pressures in the heart chambers and of valve function.

How is it treated?

Innocent murmurs do not need treatment. However, if you have a heart murmur, check with your healthcare provider before having any dental work or surgery. You may need to take antibiotics to prevent infection of your heart valves.

Treatment of heart problems that cause murmurs depends on:

- your symptoms
- the cause of the murmur
- the risk of heart damage over time if the abnormality is not corrected
- the risk of sudden complications, such as stroke or cardiac arrest.

If the murmur is caused by high blood pressure, lifestyle changes, such as a low-fat, low-salt diet and more exercise, may help. Medicines may also be prescribed to lower blood pressure. If the murmur is caused by a valve problem, you may need surgery.

How can I help prevent a heart murmur?

Little is known about how to prevent the birth defects that cause heart murmurs. However, you may be able to prevent or lessen problems such as coronary artery disease or hypertension, which can cause heart muscle damage, by:

- eating a healthy diet

- getting regular exercise according to your healthcare provider's recommendations
- not smoking.

Also, be sure to get prompt treatment for strep infections. This will help prevent rheumatic heart disease, which can damage the heart.

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