

What is a heart murmur?

When a doctor listens to your heart, he or she can hear the sounds made by the blood flowing through the heart, and by the valves in your heart opening and closing. These are normal sounds that the doctor expects to hear.

A **heart murmur** is an unexpected sound which a doctor may hear when listening to the heart with a stethoscope. Sometimes the murmur is caused by an underlying heart abnormality, but often there is no cause at all.

Murmurs can be heard when the heart contracts (a systolic murmur) or when the heart relaxes (a diastolic murmur). People who have a healthy heart can also sometimes have murmurs – for example, people with anaemia. Murmurs are also often heard in pregnant women, because of the unusually large flow of blood through the heart. However, having a heart murmur doesn't mean that there is a problem or that the person needs to have treatment for the condition.

Sometimes heart murmurs are heard because of a defect in a heart valve, or because of a congenital abnormality in the heart, such as a hole in the heart. ('Congenital' means that you were born with the condition.) Some heart valve defects may be minor, but there can be more serious problems that may need treatment – for example, if the valve is narrowed, prolapsed (weak or floppy) or leaking.

Will I need treatment?

Whether you need treatment will depend on the cause of your murmur and your symptoms.

If your doctor hears a murmur, he or she will generally arrange for you to have an echocardiogram (an ultrasound of your heart). This will show if there are any problems with the structure of your heart or valves.

The treatment for heart valve problems depends on how severe the problem is. Sometimes the symptoms can be controlled with medication. If your symptoms are moderate to severe, you may need to have valve surgery but this will depend on your condition. For more information on valve disease, see our booklet *Valvular heart disease*.

If you have a hole in the heart, your specialist may suggest that you have it closed. This can be done as a different type of procedure rather than open heart surgery and you will only need to stay in hospital for a couple of days.



Heart murmurs

'Innocent murmurs' in children

About three-quarters of heart murmurs in children are heard in children who have completely normal hearts. These are called **innocent murmurs**. They may come and go, or they may vary depending on the child's breathing and heart rate and the position the child is in. Innocent murmurs are sometimes called **flow murmurs**, **vibratory murmurs**, **venous hums** or **functional murmurs**. Cardiologists can tell the difference between these innocent murmurs and murmurs that are associated with a heart defect, by the sound they make. Children with innocent murmurs will grow up normally and by the time they reach puberty the murmur will usually have disappeared.

Children with a ventricular septal defect (VSD) – a hole between the two lower chambers of the heart – have loud murmurs which tend to get louder as the VSD closes, until the VSD is completely closed. The murmur gets louder because the blood is being forced through the narrow hole.

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HEART HELPLINE

For information and support on anything heart-related



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