



Heart murmurs in cats and kittens

Guidance for vets

Adult cats

Cats Protection frequently faces the dilemma of when to fund the costs of diagnostic workups for cats in its care in which heart murmurs have been detected. Heart murmurs are common in cats and the expense of investigation can markedly increase the costs associated with rehoming work. A study (Wagner and Fuentes et al, 2010) indicated a high prevalence of around 33% of cats in Cats Protection care having heart murmurs, only around 50% of those cats had any evidence of structural heart disease (the majority being mild). Alongside this, around 25% of cats without murmurs had ultrasonographic findings of structural heart disease.

In general, we advise to consider echocardiography for asymptomatic cats with:

- an arrhythmia and/or
- a gallop rhythm and/or
- a persistent heart murmur of grade 4/6, 5/6 or 6/6

Where there is a suspicion of a co-morbidity causing secondary heart disease, this should be investigated initially (for example, hyperthyroidism) and the heart murmur reassessed after stabilisation.

It is generally not recommended to do further cardiac workup for a cat in Cats Protection care which has a heart murmur of grade 1/6 to 3/6, if the cat is asymptomatic and has no arrhythmia or gallop rhythm.

However, potential owners would be made fully aware when adopting such cats that a heart murmur had been detected, that the cause of the murmur was unknown and the prognosis for the cat was unknown. We have created a handout for those adopting cats with heart murmurs to further explain our approach which can be found [here](#). After adoption, it is then the owner's decision whether to undertake further investigations in consultation with their own vet. A case-by-case approach will still be needed and there may be situations where deviation from the above guidelines would be appropriate.

If cats have clinical signs of heart disease, please consider the suspected prognosis of the cat. Diagnostics are indicated where a good prognosis is a possibility. If a cat has symptoms which are suspicious for heart failure, it may be that regardless of diagnosis, euthanasia is warranted. Our Field Veterinary Officers are available to support with cases, please email veterinary@cats.org.uk

A flowchart for the advised approach to heart murmurs for adult cats in Cats Protection care can be found [here](#).

Are there any discounts in place for a cat that needs a heart scan?

There is no nationwide discount scheme, however in some regions we will have access to discounted echocardiography. Cats Protection representatives are asked to contact their Field Veterinary Officer by emailing veterinary@cats.org.uk

Kittens

Congenital heart disease in kittens is uncommon and accounts for less than 10% of feline cardiac disease cases. The most common congenital abnormality in kittens is ventricular septal defect (50%), other abnormalities include valve dysplasia, pulmonary or aortic stenosis, and atrial septal defect.

Patent ductus arteriosus is less common in kittens than puppies.

Accurate assessment of heart murmurs in kittens aged seven weeks or less is challenging. Kittens presenting with a heart murmur at the first vaccination may have innocent flow murmurs. If suspicious of a flow murmur, reassessment at the time of the second vaccination is advised.

Common features of flow murmurs:

- low grade (grade 1 or 2)
- systolic murmurs
- may become louder at faster heart rates
- usually disappear by 14 to 16 weeks of age (but may be present until six months)
- kittens should be otherwise clinically well

Common features of significant heart disease:

- a continuous 'machinery' murmur
- a high grade murmur
- stunted growth
- clinical signs of congestive heart failure
(exercise intolerance, syncope, cyanosis, dyspnoea, tachypnoea)

Corrective surgery for congenital heart disease is cost prohibitive for cats in Cats Protection care.

A flowchart for the advised approach to heart murmurs for kittens in Cats Protection care can be found [here](#).

Are there any discounts in place for a kitten that needs a heart scan?

There is no nationwide discount scheme, however in some regions we will have access to discounted echocardiography. Cats Protection representatives are asked to contact their Field Veterinary Officer by emailing veterinary@cats.org.uk



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