All about a heart murmur [1]

Dear Alice,

What are the symptoms of a heart murmur? Can a heart murmur go away and, if so, how long does it usually last? Is there a cure for it? How do you know when you have a heart murmur?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Lub-dub. Lub-dub. Lub-dub. This is the typical sound made by a normal heartbeat. A heart murmur, detectable with a stethoscope, is an abnormal sound, usually a "swoosh," occurring during a heartbeat. Put simply, this is the sound of turbulent blood in or near your heart. Heart murmurs can have a few different causes, many of which are harmless. Some heart murmurs can go away (such as those caused by exercise) and some are always there (such as those caused by heart valve abnormalities). There is no cure per se, but this is largely because a heart murmur itself is not a disease.

There are two types of murmurs: innocent and abnormal. An innocent heart murmur is simply caused by the sound of blood moving rapidly through your heart. It is harmless and usually won't be accompanied by any other symptoms. Innocent murmurs are quite common and can be caused by a variety of things. Some of these include:

- Physical activity
- Pregnancy
- Fever
- Heart surgery
- An excessive amount of thyroid hormone in your body (hyperthyroidism) [2]
- Being an infant or a child (50 percent of children have heart murmurs at some point during childhood)

Some heart murmurs are indications of a more serious, underlying problem. These are the "abnormal" heart murmurs. In adults, the most common causes of abnormal murmurs are most often due to acquired heart valve problems. In children, congenital (something you are born with) heart disease is a frequent culprit. Other causes (for either a child or an adult) include disease (such as rheumatic fever), infection (such as endocarditis), and other congenital defects. The tricky thing is that these, too, are often not accompanied by any other obvious symptoms (besides the unusual sounds your doctor will hear when listening to your heartbeat). If you experience any of the following symptoms, though, it's highly recommended...
to see your health care provider:

- Dizziness
- Shortness of breath without cause
- Chest pain
- Sweating without exertion
- Fainting
- Weight gain in adults and children
- Poor appetite in infants
- Pronounced neck veins

If you suspect that you have a heart murmur or experience any of the symptoms listed above, visit your health care provider in order to rule out any serious underlying causes. S/he can determine if it is innocent or abnormal and provide treatment if necessary.

Here’s to a healthy heart!

Alice!

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