

Take heart murmurs seriously say cardiologists

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Detecting a heart murmur on your own can be tricky. A murmur is an extra heart sound that can be heard by a stethoscope.

Sometimes, a murmur sounds like a humming sound, which can be faint or loud. It might be temporary or persistent. Heart murmurs may be present at birth or develop later in life during pregnancy, phases of rapid growth like adolescence, or from a fever or anemia.

"The murmur may disappear as quickly as it comes if it has a temporary cause," says Michel Barsoum, M.B., Ch.B., a cardiologist and vascular medicine specialist at Mayo Clinic Health System in Chippewa Falls, Eau Claire and Rice Lake, Wisconsin. "However, a murmur also could be persistent and loud, easily heard, and sound like a churning mill wheel or cooing seagull. This might indicate a serious heart problem."

What causes a heart murmur?

Several factors can cause a murmur. It could be a heart [valve](#) problem or a hole in the heart.

The valves in your heart act as doors between the chambers, or rooms, of the heart. In the case of a murmur, a valve may be tight or leaky. When heart valves are narrow, this is called stenosis. A murmur also could be from a leaky valve, called regurgitation.

A murmur also may occur from high blood flow in people with a fever or with low red blood cells, called anemia.

Some people have a family history of [heart murmur](#) and [heart disease](#). Some are born with a congenital condition causing a murmur. Others have had a recent severe infection or illness that could damage a heart valve and need immediate medical attention.

Innocent or harmless heart murmurs don't typically cause symptoms, and most heart murmurs aren't serious.

Symptoms of a serious or worrisome heart murmur depend on the cause and require evaluation by a health care professional.

These heart murmur symptoms may include:

- Blue or gray lips or fingernails
- Chest pain
- Fainting
- Fever
- Leg swelling
- Lingered cough
- Shortness of breath
- Sudden weight gain
- Swollen liver or neck veins
- Worsening fatigue

How is a heart murmur diagnosed?

It's common for a heart murmur to be detected during a [physical exam](#) being given for another reason. If a health care professional hears a murmur, you'll be asked questions about your personal and [family history](#) that could indicate a reason for the murmur.

Several criteria are used to determine if a murmur is innocent or worrisome, including:

- Volume: The loudness of the heart murmur is evaluated on a scale from 1 to 6. The loudest heart murmur is a 6.
- Location: The location of the murmur in the heart will be identified, along with determining if the sound spreads to the neck or back.
- Pitch: The heart murmur may have a high, medium or low pitch.
- Timing: A heart murmur that occurs when blood leaves the heart is a systolic murmur. A murmur that occurs when the heart fills with blood is called a diastolic murmur. A murmur also may be heard throughout the heartbeat. When the murmur is heard as blood passes through the heart, it may be a sign of a larger heart problem.

You will need to undergo testing to determine the cause of the heart murmur. Your health care professional likely will order an ultrasound picture of your heart, called an echocardiogram, or echo, to show detailed images of your heart's valves, chambers, structure and function.

"Once the cause of a heart murmur has been found, some people will need repeated evaluation over the years," says Dr. Barsoum. "It's important to find the cause so the right treatment can be determined."

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