

*Dr. Cecilia Ho is a graduate of the College of Veterinary Medicine at Michigan State University. She decided to specialize in feline medicine two years into private practice as she found feline medicine to be more challenging and rewarding.*

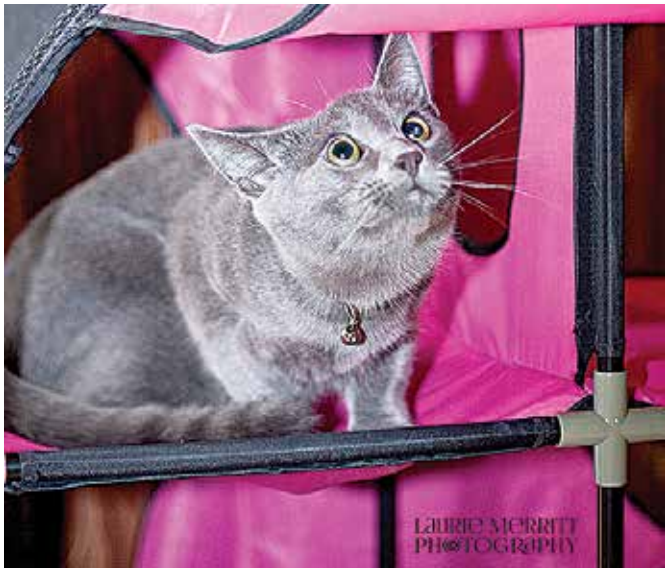
*She currently shares her home with five cats- all of which have her trained to their beck and call.*

## FELINE CARDIAC DISEASE

**Question:** My cat was just at my veterinarian's office for a routine physical exam and was diagnosed with a heart murmur. What does this mean for the health of my cat and should I be concerned about it?

**Answer:** A heart murmur is caused by a disturbance of blood flow within the heart. This disturbance can be due to one or many factors. In most cases there is an abnormality of the muscle that makes up the walls of the heart which then leads to dynamic changes in the flow of blood when the heart contracts. The turbulence created by these changes results in the sound of a heart murmur.

*photo courtesy of Laurie Merritt Photography*



As with all diseases, early detection and prompt treatment improve the chances of stabilizing and in some cases, even reversing some of the cardiac changes. Cats that have well controlled cardiac disease can lead full and long lives.

The age of a cat diagnosed with a heart murmur can help your veterinarian determine the cause for the murmur. In very young

cats, usually between the ages of 1 to 5 years, the reason is usually a congenital one. There are certain breeds that are predisposed to genetic mutations within their cardiac muscles that put them more at risk for heart disease. These include Maine Coons, Ragdolls, Persians and Himalayans. Fortunately, there are now genetic tests available that allow owners and breeders to screen their cats for these genetic mutations.

If the cat is older when diagnosed with a heart murmur, the reasons are usually due to diseases that cats develop as they age. The most common disease that causes cardiac disease in older cats is hyperthyroidism. This disease results in the excessive production of thyroid hormone which causes the cat's metabolism to rise. This in turn causes the heart to beat faster and work harder. Over time the stress of these changes on an aging heart results in cardiac disease.

Once a heart murmur is diagnosed in a cat, your veterinarian can proceed with several additional diagnostic tests to determine the severity of the cardiac disease. A newly developed screening test called Feline Cardiopet Pro-BNP measures the amount of stretch and deformity of the cardiac muscle. This is a simple blood test. The greater the stretch and deformity of the muscle, which would indicate more severe cardiac disease, the higher the test result.

If the Pro-BNP results are very high, indicating that there is significant cardiac disease, the next diagnostic step would be a cardiac ultrasound. This allows veterinarians to evaluate the interior structures of the heart, such as the heart valves and also the appearance and thickness of the heart walls. Once the correct diagnosis is made the cat can be started on the appropriate medical therapy.

In the case of an older cat, diagnostics would also include a comprehensive blood panel, measuring the cat's blood pressure, a urinalysis and perhaps also a heartworm test to determine the cause of the heart murmur.

Treating cardiac disease in cats can be very rewarding. As with all diseases, early detection and prompt treatment improve the chances of stabilizing and in some cases, even reversing some of the cardiac changes. Cats that have well controlled cardiac disease can lead full and long lives. By taking your cat to your veterinarian for regular exams and screening tests, you can ensure that despite the presence of cardiac disease, your cat will be able to live a long and happy life.

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Cecilia Ho, DVM  
5002-E High Point Rd.  
(Hunt Village Shopping Ctr.)  
Greensboro • 336.235.0770



see ad on page 16