

I have a heart murmur, what now?

An echocardiogram could
save your life.



Listen
to your
heart 

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A heart murmur is an extra, unusual sound in your heartbeat.

It can sound like a whooshing or swishing noise. The extra noise happens when your blood doesn't flow smoothly through your heart¹.

A new heart murmur, especially after the age of 65, could be a sign of a serious heart problem like heart valve disease².

Heart valve disease often goes undiagnosed and untreated as symptoms are commonly ignored as signs of aging. It can progress quickly and if left untreated will severely reduce life expectancy³ and could lead to heart failure⁴.

Use this guide to understand the tests you need to diagnose heart valve disease.





How is a heart murmur diagnosed?

Your doctor will listen to your heart with a stethoscope to see if you have a heart murmur. If they think it could be an abnormal heart murmur, your doctor may arrange tests⁵ like:

Electrocardiogram (ECG)

Chest X-Ray

Echocardiogram (ECHO)



These are all excellent tests but if you really want to know what's going on with your heart you will need an echocardiogram⁶.

This simple and painless procedure uses ultrasounds to create images of the heart and evaluate anatomy and function⁷.

Heart valve disease is treatable if diagnosed early which is why it is important to get an echo quickly⁸.

Finding it hard to get an echo?

Waiting times for echo and cardiology appointments can be very long in some areas. Ask your GP how long you are likely to wait and about options to get an echo or cardiology appointment through private providers. You can pay for this yourself or with health insurance if you have it. There are many private clinics that offer echo with very little waiting time.

If you need treatment, you can always choose to go back into the public system after diagnosis.



All new heart murmurs should be investigated further as some are a sign of heart valve disease⁵.

What is heart valve disease?

There are four valves in your heart which act like doors opening and closing to let blood flow through the chambers of the heart and to the body⁹.

When we age so do our heart valves and they can become stiff and not open and close as well as they used to. An abnormal heart murmur can often be the result of a problem with one of the four valves in your heart, usually either valve stenosis or regurgitation¹⁰.

These valve problems mean that your heart has to work a lot harder and can lead to common symptoms of valve disease.

Regurgitation

The valve is leaky and doesn't fully close.



Open



Closed

Stenosis

The valve becomes stiff and doesn't open enough.



Open



Closed

Symptoms

Symptoms of heart valve disease tend to come on very slowly and are often mistaken for common signs of aging⁶.

Even after a heart valve condition has been diagnosed, it can be 10 or 20 years before you experience symptoms¹¹ so it's very important to have your heart checked regularly, even if you feel well.

Your doctor or cardiologist will tell you how often to do this.

If you are diagnosed with heart valve disease, symptoms are the most important indicator to your doctor that you may need treatment.



Symptoms¹² can include:



Heart palpitations



Shortness of breath



Sudden weight gain



Dizziness or fainting



Trouble doing usual activities/exercise



Fever or night sweats



Ankle swelling



Extreme tiredness



Chest pain



1 in 8 people over the age of 75 have Aortic Stenosis which is the most common type of heart valve disease. So, if you have a murmur and need an echocardiogram, you may be getting examined for Aortic Stenosis¹³.



How serious is my Aortic Stenosis?

Your doctor may describe your condition as mild, moderate, or severe, based on the results of your tests.

Which stage you have depends on how damaged your valve is and the amount of blood that's still able to pass through it.

Aortic stenosis is usually a progressive disease so no matter what stage you are at you will need to be monitored over time to see if your disease has progressed and ensure you receive treatment at the right time¹⁴.

The table below gives guidelines¹⁵ for how often you should be getting an echo:

Stage of Aortic Stenosis	Recommended Echo Time
Mild	Every 5 years
Moderate	Every 2 years
Severe	Every year (if no symptoms)
Severe with symptoms	This is when your valve needs to be replaced

For information about treatment options visit newheartvalve.com/nz

Which of these best describes you?

And what should you talk to your doctor about.

I don't know if I have a heart murmur

Questions for your doctor

- Can you check for a heart murmur?
- Will you order an echocardiogram or any other tests if you detect a murmur?
- Can you check for heart valve disease?

I've been told I have a heart murmur

Questions for your doctor

- When do I need a new or follow-up echocardiogram?
- Can you check for heart valve disease?
- Will you refer me to a cardiologist?

I have heart valve disease

Questions for your doctor

- When do I need a new or follow-up echocardiogram?
- Have my heart valve disease symptoms progressed?
- When will I need treatment?
- What are my treatment options?

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My biggest regret is waiting six months before I went to the doctor. I could easily have left it too late. We get a warrant of fitness on our car every year, we should do the same for ourselves.

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Ross McGregor

New Zealand patient and heart valve disease survivor.



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Information on this material includes educational information regarding certain conditions and potential therapies or treatment options. Other therapies or treatment options may be available, and you should discuss any educational information you access online with your healthcare professional. Appropriate treatment for individuals is a matter for healthcare professionals to decide in consultation with each individual.

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Edwards Lifesciences (New Zealand) Ltd. PO Box 28658 Remuera, New Zealand.
Phone: 0800 222 601.