What are heart murmurs in newborns?

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Many parents will be surprised to learn that a heart murmur isn't a disease. Rather, it is a symptom of an underlying condition. If your child has a heart murmur, your pediatrician will hear it while listening to your child's heartbeat with a stethoscope.

As the name implies, a heart murmur is an unusual sound produced by the heart in the course of its normal pumping action. Murmurs in children are relatively common and often do not signify any serious problem. The extra sounds might be nothing more than those of normal blood flowing through a healthy heart.

If a murmur is heard at birth, however, or during the first six months of life, your pediatrician might want to pursue further testing to rule out more serious congenital heart defects. Some murmurs are caused by septal defects, which occur when the walls separating the left and right sides of the heart have an abnormality that allows blood to mix. Murmurs can also signify underlying blood vessel disease.

A murmur is usually the only symptom of patent ductus arteriosus (PDA), a potentially serious condition in which the ductus arteriosus (a blood vessel in the fetal heart) fails to properly close at or shortly after birth. This causes blood to circulate abnormally between two major arteries near the heart.

If your pediatrician hears a heart murmur, the doctor will likely rate the murmur on a scale of one through six for intensity and note other murmur characteristics, including whether it's harsh or high frequency. Pediatricians who suspect a murmur is related to a congenital heart problem might refer a child to a specialist, such as a pediatric cardiologist, for further evaluation. Often, an echocardiogram is performed to look at the heart structures in depth.

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Takeaways

- Murmurs in children are a symptom (not a disease), and they're often benign.
- Murmurs are more of a health concern when they occur in the first six months of life because this can indicate a congenital heart abnormality.
- Murmurs often are the only symptom of patent ductus arteriosus, a congenital heart problem.