Information about your heart murmur

Information for patients
Pre-Operative Assessment

What is a heart murmur?
Normal heart sounds are caused by the heart valves opening and closing and make a ‘lub-dupp’ or ‘lub-dub’ sound. A heart murmur is an extra or unusual sound heard during listening to the heart. Murmurs range from very faint to very loud. Sometimes they sound like a whooshing or swishing noise. They are caused by turbulent blood flow through the heart and valves. All these sounds can be heard when your chest is examined using a stethoscope.

What is the significance of a heart murmur?
Heart murmurs can be divided into innocent (harmless) ones and those requiring further investigation. The vast majority of murmurs are innocent heart murmurs and are not caused by heart disease. These murmurs are common in children, young adults and pregnant women, where there can be increased blood flow through the heart, and in the elderly as the heart valves stiffen with age.

Abnormal heart murmurs most often are caused by acquired heart valve disease in adults. These heart valves can be leaky or they can be narrowed. People who have abnormal heart murmurs may have signs or symptoms of heart problems such as chest pain, breathlessness, dizzy spells and collapse. Some people may have no symptoms at all.

What will happen if the pre-assessment nurse hears a murmur?
If the nurse practitioner hears any heart murmur, the patient will need an electrocardiogram (ECG) to check for any heart rhythm abnormalities or for any strain in the heart function. If this ECG is normal, and the heart murmur does not radiate into the neck and there are no other symptoms suggesting heart disease, there will be no need for further investigations or treatment. If the heart murmur is heard going into the neck, or the ECG is abnormal or the patient has other symptoms suggesting heart disease, then the patient may require an echocardiogram (ECHO) before any operation. The ECHO produces an image of the heart during its function. This allows assessment of the efficiency of the heart valves and the heart muscles. If an abnormality is found, the ECHO can give an idea of the nature and severity of it.
What is an echocardiogram?
This is an ultrasound scan of the heart that looks for any abnormalities of the heart valve or muscle function. This is a painless, risk free procedure which lasts approximately 30 minutes.

Why is it important to fully assess a heart murmur before an anaesthetic?
Murmurs which are the result of significant heart disease may increase the risk of anaesthesia and surgery. Not every patient who has an ECHO will have an increased anaesthetic risk as they may have no significant disease or a mild abnormality which is not affecting heart function. For those patients who do have significant cardiac disease there are different anaesthetic options depending upon the operation being considered. Knowing this will help the anaesthetist to discuss these options fully with their patient and minimise any increased risk.

What is the longer term outlook of a murmur?
A heart murmur isn’t a disease, and most murmurs are innocent. Innocent murmurs do not need any treatment. Having an innocent murmur doesn’t require anyone to limit their physical activity or do anything else special.

If however patients are shown to have an abnormal heart valve, they may need further investigations or treatment. Many of these murmurs just need monitoring. A copy of the ECHO results will be sent to your GP, who will be able to discuss this with you and coordinate any specialist follow up or treatment you might need in the future.