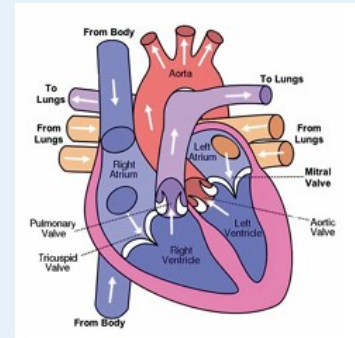


THE HEART

The heart consists of the left and right atria “receiving chambers”, left and right atrioventricular (AV) valves, left and right pumping ventricles, and aortic and pulmonic semilunar valves. The right heart collects blood returning from the body via the large veins and pumps it to the lungs. From the lungs, the blood goes into the left heart which pumps it to the body via the aorta.

Many conditions are not serious enough to cause any signs and a horse can live a long and happy life with a mild heart condition.



HEART MURMURS

Most heart murmurs are caused by turbulent blood flow in one or more of the chambers of the heart, often caused by a valve not closing properly. We hear this as a ‘whoosh’ rather than the valves snapping shut with a ‘lub-dub.’

The majority of heart murmurs heard in the horse are of no cause for concern and can increase or vanish with exercise or when the horse is in an excited state. In general, heart murmurs should be assessed by a specialist, especially when accompanied by other signs of cardiac dysfunction or illness.

Heart murmurs are relatively common and often are not a cause for concern but the higher the grade, the more of a concern the murmur can be:

Grade 1 – Very soft murmur that requires extended auscultation to detect.

Grade 2 – Readily audible murmur.

Grade 3 – Readily audible murmur that is moderately loud.

Grade 4 – Readily audible murmur that radiates widely.

Grade 5 – Very loud murmur with a palpable thrill (vibration) that is detectable with fingertip pressure over the heart.

Grade 6 – Very loud murmur associated with a palpable thrill that is audible with the stethoscope held just off the chest.



Heart rhythm irregularities in horses

Heart rhythms may be regular or irregular.

Horses commonly have a “dropped beat,” where the heart seems to pause but the rhythm stays regular. This is called a second-degree AV block and is normal if it disappears during exercise.

A more serious irregularity is atrial fibrillation, where chaotic electrical activity prevents normal atrial contraction, producing an unpredictable heartbeat. Horses often appear normal at rest, but reduced performance may appear during strenuous exercise. It can occur with heart disease or in otherwise healthy horses, and draught breeds are more commonly affected.

Diagnosis requires an ECG to detect irregular rhythm and echocardiography to assess heart structure and function

Because arrhythmias can be unpredictable, vets may advise against riding in significant cases, though serious heart disease is rare and many horses remain suitable for light work.

