

## RHEUMATIC HEART DISEASE

**Rheumatic heart disease (RHD) is a condition that develops when the body's heart valves and muscles are damaged by acute rheumatic fever.**

### **Q What is Rheumatic Heart Disease (RHD)?**

**A** Rheumatic heart disease is caused by acute rheumatic fever (ARF) or recurring rheumatic fever which has been left untreated. In some people who have had rheumatic fever, the reaction to the bacteria can cause heart problems. Rheumatic heart disease is a serious, disabling, sometimes fatal condition, but it is also preventable with early diagnosis and treatment.

### **Q What happens to the heart in rheumatic heart disease?**

**A** Rheumatic heart disease occurs when the heart valves are damaged as a result of acute rheumatic fever. The immune reaction affects heart valves and the heart muscle by causing damage and scarring. This damage means the heart valves have trouble opening and closing and makes blood flow through your heart more difficult.

### **Q Does everyone with acute rheumatic fever get rheumatic heart disease?**

**A** No, not everyone who gets rheumatic fever will get rheumatic heart disease. However, a large number of people who get rheumatic fever will get rheumatic heart disease.

### **Q What are the symptoms of rheumatic heart disease?**

**A** Some people do not get any symptoms for many years. Some people might have a heart murmur (an abnormal sound which is heard when a doctor listens to your heart). Other people may have more severe symptoms including chest pain, tiredness, shortness of breath, or swelling of the legs.

### **Q How do I know if I have rheumatic heart disease?**

**A** Rheumatic heart disease is diagnosed using an ultrasound of the heart (called an echocardiogram or echo). This looks at the valves and pumping function of the heart. If your doctor thinks you may have rheumatic heart disease, they may arrange for you to have an echocardiogram.

### **Q What treatment is available for rheumatic heart disease?**

**A** The treatment of rheumatic heart disease depends on how bad the disease is and where the damage in the heart is (i.e. the valves, muscle or both). Rheumatic heart disease can be managed with regular antibiotics and monitoring, but at times surgery may be required. You should speak to your doctor about what treatment is needed if you have this condition.

### **Q Why do I need to have the antibiotics injections every four weeks?**

**A** People who have acute rheumatic fever or rheumatic heart disease need antibiotic injections every four weeks to prevent new episodes of acute rheumatic fever, which can make the heart problems worse.



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**Q How long do I have to have antibiotic injections for if I have rheumatic heart disease?**

**A** This depends on how severe the rheumatic heart disease is. Some people need injections until they are 21, and others may need them until they are 40. Your doctor will advise you what is best for you.

**Q What happens when a woman is pregnant with rheumatic heart disease?**

**A** Pregnant women with rheumatic heart disease are at risk. They may experience an irregular heartbeat and heart failure, due to increased blood volume putting more pressure on the heart valves. It is important to see your doctor early in planning for pregnancy and during pregnancy.

**Q What are the possible complications of rheumatic heart disease?**

**A** If you have a severe case of rheumatic heart disease you may experience a number of complications including heart failure, inflammation of the heart, irregular heart beat, disability, complications with pregnancy and delivery, stroke and early death.

**Q How can I minimise complications relating to rheumatic heart disease?**

**A** To reduce the risk of complications from rheumatic heart disease, it is important to follow these steps:

- See your doctor for the treatment of sore throats and skin sores
- Ensure your house has working taps, toilets and hot water
- Get an antibiotic injection every four weeks
- Have regular check-ups with your doctor
- Have regular heart ultrasounds and appointments with your heart specialist
- Have regular check-ups with your dentist
- Ensure you are up-to-date with your pneumococcal vaccine
- Get a yearly flu vaccine
- Talk to your doctor about appropriate prenatal care if you are pregnant or planning pregnancy.

**Q How does protecting my skin help protect my heart?**

**A** Protecting your skin from infections, or seeking early treatment for scabies or skin sores, helps to protect the heart by minimising the risk of germs that can enter the body through the skin.

**Q What can I do if I get a skin infection or sore throat?**

**A** If you have skin infections or sore throat, see your doctor early and ask if you need antibiotics.

**Q Is rheumatic heart disease preventable?**

**A** Rheumatic heart disease and acute rheumatic fever are both preventable. Antibiotic treatments (LA Bicillin®) can reduce the risk of acute rheumatic fever and rheumatic heart disease.

**Q Can non-Indigenous people get rheumatic heart disease?**

**A** Most cases of acute rheumatic fever and rheumatic heart disease in Australia are seen in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who live in communities where there is social, cultural and economic inequity, over-crowding and barriers to accessing health care.

Despite it being eradicated in many parts of the world, there are still people living with rheumatic heart disease in sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, Central and South Asia and the South Pacific.

In Australia, there are non-Indigenous Australians living with rheumatic heart disease in the older population.

**Q Is rheumatic heart disease contagious?**

**A** Although the *Group A Strep* infection which causes acute rheumatic fever is contagious, rheumatic heart disease is not. You cannot catch rheumatic heart disease from someone else who has it.

**Q Can I lead a healthy life if I have rheumatic heart disease?**

**A** With regular antibiotic injections, and reviews with your doctor, a person with rheumatic heart disease can lead a fulfilling life.