



Heart Health Fact Sheet

Let's Chat Rheumatic Heart Disease



Rheumatic Heart Disease (RHD) is a condition where you have long-lasting heart valve damage after one or more illness episodes of Acute Rheumatic Fever (ARF). ARF occurs when you have a strep infection, your immune system will instead create an inflammation-like response in your body, which can result in some unpleasant symptoms. These symptoms includes fever, jerky body movements, nodules/lumps on wrists, elbows, knees, ankles and sections of your spine as well as chest pain and fluid build-up in your legs.

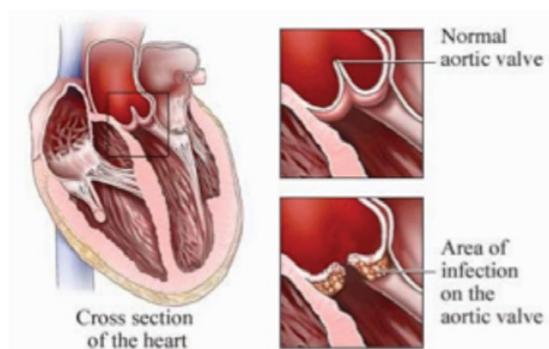
What happens to your heart and body during pregnancy?

In RHD, one or more of your heart valves may be left with scarring or even stretching, leading to issues with your blood flowing properly. When these valves are damaged, your blood may either backflow into your heart's chambers or may become stuck and not be able to be pumped out through your valves.

What are the symptoms?

The signs and symptoms of RHD appear to be a combination of infection-like symptoms as well as symptoms of heart valve disease. Here are some of the common signs and symptoms of RHD:

- Fever
- Shortness of breath
- Oedema (swelling of fluid) in the ankles and legs
- Fainting
- Orthopnea (when you cannot lay down due to breathing problems)
- Chest pain
- Palpitations



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What are the complications?

There are a number of complications which have been linked to RHD:

- Heart failure
- Stroke, as clots can form in your enlarged or damaged heart valves and then travel to your brain
- Arrhythmias, where your heart is in an abnormal rhythm
- Pregnancy complications
- Early death in young adults
- Disability as well reduced quality of life

What are the statistics?

- It is estimated that at least 15.6 million people worldwide are living with RHD, with the burden tending to be within developing nations.
- RHD is 2 times more likely to affect women than men, and women are more likely to be affected during childbearing years.
- 94% of the RHD cases diagnosed in Australia are people from an Aboriginal and Torres-Strait Islander background.
- Aboriginal and Torres-Strait Islander populations are 20-55 times more likely to die from RHD than their non-Indigenous counterparts.

What are the treatments?

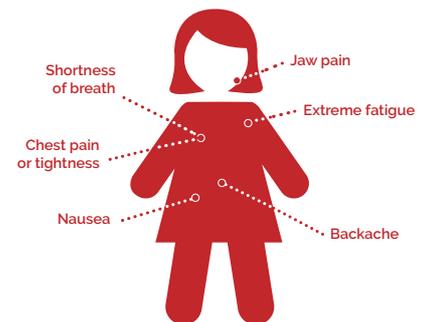
- **Diagnostic tests:** The medical team looking after may need to do a series of tests to see if you have ARF or RHD. These include blood tests, an ECG (heart rate and rhythm trace), an ECHO (ultrasound of the heart) as well as swabbing your throat for strep infections.
- **Antibiotics:** Typically you will receive an antibiotic treatment regime to help fight any infection of ARF or any infection on your heart valve. If you have had ARF or RHD you may need antibiotic injections every 3-4 weeks to prevent further infection.
- **Other medications:** You may need medications for other associated conditions including fever, pain, stroke risk and heart failure.
- **Heart valve surgery:** Open heart surgery may be required to repair your damaged heart valves depending on the severity of your symptoms.
- **Personal hygiene:** Ensure you wash and shower regularly to prevent the spread of infection, wash your hands regularly to keep them clean and keep any breaks in the skin (such as cuts or sores) clean and covered.
- **Regular dental visits:** Annual dental check ups are important, as is dental hygiene as tooth infections can lead to ARF or RHD.
- **Regular check ups with your doctors:** Attend regular appointments with your doctors to ensure they are monitoring your heart and helping you manage your condition.
- **Ask for help to improve your living situation:** Bacterial infections such as strep can be easily transmitted through body fluid exposure. Coughing and living in cramped conditions can facilitate the spread of bacteria. If possible, try to improve your living environment to reduce risk of infection.

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Heart Attack Signs in Women

Warning signs differ between men and women. Women's symptoms include chest discomfort which radiates up to the throat, jaw and through to the back and shoulder blades, extreme fatigue, shortness of breath, heart fluttering, light-headedness and nausea.



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Resources

Rheumatic Heart Disease Australia <https://www.rhdaustralia.org.au/>

Heart Support Australia is a NFP aimed at providing support and resources for people after a cardiac event <https://www.heartsupport.org.au/>

Rheumatic Heart disease Australia has an app for tracking your RHD treatment <https://www.rhdaustralia.org.au/treatment-tracker-app>