

Cardiomyopathy

Cardiomyopathy is a disease of the heart muscle that causes the heart to enlarge and become weaker.¹

Cardiomyopathy damages the heart muscle, making it weaker and causing it to stretch. If the heart cannot keep pumping blood well enough, a condition called *heart failure* develops which needs special treatment.² In some cases, a heart transplant may be required to treat severe heart failure – but most people with cardiomyopathy do not need a transplant. In fact, most people are only mildly affected and the impact on their lives is small.

Cardiomyopathy is different to heart attack, which also damages part of the heart muscle but has a different cause.

The normal heart

The heart is a muscle that pumps blood to all parts of the body. At rest, the heart muscle contracts, or beats, approximately 60-100 times per minute – pushing about 5 litres of blood around the body. When necessary (for example, during physical activity), it can work much harder to deliver extra oxygen and nutrients to the body. Like any other muscle, the heart muscle must be kept strong in order to work effectively.

What causes cardiomyopathy?

In most cases, tests can't show the cause, but the problem can still be treated effectively. Several known causes are:

- **Alcohol:** In large doses alcohol can damage the heart. Some people are sensitive to alcohol even at lower levels of consumption. In some cases, the damage done to the heart can be reversed if the person stops drinking altogether.
- **Viral infection:** A common cause of cardiomyopathy is viral infection of the heart. The infection can damage the heart muscle, but the damage may not show for months or even longer. However, most viral infections do not cause heart problems.
- **Family history:** A family history of cardiomyopathy (that is, when more than one relative has cardiomyopathy of an unknown cause) can increase the likelihood of developing the disease. Most of the family will not suffer from the problem, but it is wise for all members to be checked by a cardiologist.

What are the symptoms?

If the heart can not pump well enough, symptoms of heart failure may develop, such as tiredness, shortness of breath and fluid build-up, which can cause the ankles to swell.

¹ This information sheet does not deal with another type of cardiomyopathy called hypertrophic cardiomyopathy. For more information refer to the Heart Foundation information sheet titled *Hypertrophic Cardiomyopathy*.

² For more information on heart failure, refer to the Heart Foundation booklet titled *Let's Talk About Heart Failure*.

Diagnosis

Several tests are used to make a diagnosis of cardiomyopathy. These tests include a chest X-ray, echocardiography (ultrasound of the heart), blood tests and physical examination.

What can be done?

Medical treatment and attention to relevant lifestyle factors can dramatically relieve symptoms of heart failure and improve the health of people with cardiomyopathy.

Medications to treat heart failure may include:

- **ACE inhibitors:** Block the effects of important hormones, dilate blood vessels and reduce the heart's workload.
- **Fluid pills (diuretics):** Help to rid the body of excess fluid. Some cause potassium loss and a potassium supplement may be needed.
- **Beta-Blockers:** Block the effect of nerves that act on the heart and other parts of the body, reduce the heart rate and lower blood pressure, thereby reducing the workload placed on the heart.
- **Digitalis (digoxin):** Helps the heart to pump more efficiently and helps regulate an irregular rhythm.
- **Anti-coagulant (warfarin):** Thins the blood to prevent clotting. You will need regular blood tests to monitor this.
- **Rhythm control drugs (antiarrhythmics):** Help to control the heart's rhythm.
- **Other medications:** Other medications may be required depending on individual needs. For example, nitroglycerine tablets or spray may be needed for those who get angina.³

Lifestyle

- **Do not smoke:** Smoking reduces the amount of oxygen in your blood, and damages the walls of the arteries. Stopping smoking is one of the most important things you can do to reduce your risk of further heart disease. For more information on and support with quitting smoking, contact your doctor or call the Quitline on 131 848 (24 hours).
- **Reduce salt intake:** Salt causes the body to retain fluid which can build up and put added strain on the heart. To reduce salt intake:
 - eat plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables
 - when shopping, check the labels of foods and choose products low in salt (with sodium content of 120mg per 100g or less)
 - avoid highly salted seasonings, processed foods and takeaway foods that are high in salt
 - use garlic, herbs and spices instead of salt
 - avoid adding salt during cooking or at the table.
- **Limit alcohol:** Alcohol can damage your heart and you should discuss this with your doctor. You may be asked to stop or reduce your drinking. One drink a day may be alright in mild cases. However, avoiding alcohol altogether is highly recommended.

³ For more information on angina refer to the Heart Foundation brochure titled *Living with Angina*.

Undertake regular physical activity

Regular light to moderate physical activity, such as walking, exercise bicycling, lifting light weights and stretching is important. Try to be active every day. Talk to your doctor about the type and level that is suitable for you. Do what you can without getting breathless or overtired – you should be able to talk easily while doing physical activity. Avoid strenuous activities unless your doctor has approved them.

Transplantation

Some patients may be asked to consider a heart transplant if heart failure becomes severe. For further information refer to the Heart Foundation information sheet titled *Heart Transplants and Organ Donation*.

Remember – if you have cardiomyopathy:

- much can be achieved by medication, physical activity and healthy eating
- follow a healthy lifestyle and
- work closely with your doctor.

Further information

For further information on general heart health, heart failure, hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, healthy eating, angina, heart transplants and other topics please call Heartline, the Heart Foundation's national telephone information service, on 1300 36 27 87 (cost of a local call) or visit our website www.heartfoundation.com.au.

Several support groups exist, including the Cardiomyopathy Association of Australia. Contact Heartline for details of the group nearest to you.

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