What You Should Know about Aortic Dissection

Questions to Ask Your Doctor

- Do I have aortic dissection? If so, what type do I have?
- What caused my condition?
- What tests do I need?
- What treatments are available for me with the risks and benefits of each option?
- Are there medications that can help?
- Is there genetic testing available to me or my family members?
- What diet and lifestyle changes should I make, if any?
- How should I monitor my condition?
- When should I call you (the doctor) or 911?

Contact Us

If you would like to receive support or need more information, please contact us at:

1-888-HEART99
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Mended Hearts

Living Longer with Heart Disease

Discussion Guide for Patients & Caregivers
What is Aortic Dissection?
Aortic dissection is a medical emergency. It is when there is a tear in the inner layer of the aorta—the main artery that carries blood to the body. This tear causes blood to get between the three layers of the aorta and causes them to split. This often happens over a long length of the aorta.

When blood gets between the layers, it, along with the oxygen and nutrients it carries, cannot get to your organs. This can affect your heart, brain, lungs, kidneys, arms and legs. If the tear gets to the outer layer of the aorta, blood will leak out into your body which is often deadly.

There are two types of Aortic Dissection:

- **Type A** dissections involve the ascending aorta – the part that is closest to your heart. The tear may extend all the way through the descending aorta and towards the abdomen. This type is more common and requires immediate treatment/surgery.

- **Type B** dissections do not involve the ascending aorta and originate in the descending aorta. Type B dissections do not always require surgery, and in some cases may be treated with medication.

Signs & Symptoms

Aortic dissection can be hard to diagnose because the signs and symptoms are often the same as for other problems like heart attack or a pulmonary embolism. If you have any of these signs and symptoms or severe pain, get medical help right away.

- Severe, often sharp or tearing pain in the upper back or chest
- Rapid heart rate and/or weak pulse
- Fainting or dizziness
- Abdominal/stomach pain
- Difficulty breathing
- Low blood pressure
- Nausea
- Sweating and paleness
- Confusion
- Arm and leg weakness or pain
- Symptoms of stroke (paralysis, vision problems, difficulty speaking)

Causes & Risk Factors

If you have any of these risk factors for aortic dissection, it is important that you know the symptoms and are monitored regularly by a heart doctor.

- **Uncontrolled high blood pressure**
- **Stimulant or illicit drug use** (methamphetamine or cocaine)
- **High intensity weightlifting**
- **Hereditary and genetic conditions:**
  - Genetic conditions like Marfan Syndrome, Vascular Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome (VEDS), Loeys-Dietz Syndrome, and Turner Syndrome
  - Family history of thoracic aortic aneurysm or thoracic aortic dissection
- **Aneurysm**—weak and bulging area of the aorta
- **Chest trauma or injury** from an accident.
- **Structural heart problems** like coarctation of the aorta and bicuspid aortic valve
- **High cholesterol with atherosclerosis**
- **Smoking**

Treatment

- Dissection of the ascending aorta is a medical emergency and requires surgery.
- Dissection of the descending aorta sometimes requires surgery but not usually immediately.
- Medications may be prescribed to lower blood pressure and heart rate.

20-50% of patients with Type A dissection die before reaching the hospital. The risk of death increases for every one hour a type A dissection is left untreated!