

What are Heart Problems?

Heart problems can involve the structure of the heart, the way it works, the way it beats, or a mix of these. There are two major types: congenital (present at birth) and acquired (develops later).

Congenital heart defects (CHD) are heart differences that babies are born with. This means their heart formed differently during pregnancy. CHDs are often found before birth through routine prenatal testing. They can be inherited or caused by things in the environment such as smoke, viruses, or certain medicines the baby was exposed to before birth. Some congenital heart defects are mild, need no treatment, and can even resolve on their own. Others may require medicine, surgery, or other procedures.

Acquired heart problems develop after a child is born. Certain illnesses, viruses, or bacteria can damage the heart.

Some heart problems affect the electrical system that controls the heartbeat. These can be inherited or acquired. Often, symptoms like chest pain are not caused by the heart at all. For example, chest pain can come from spasms in the chest wall and nerves, or may be caused by inflammation where the ribs connect to the breastbone. Both forms of chest pain are common and usually not dangerous.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

How common are heart conditions?

About one in 100 babies is born with a congenital heart defect; approximately one in four of those babies will have a defect serious enough to need surgery in the first year of life.

What should I do if I suspect my child has a heart problem?

Talk to your medical provider. They will examine your child, collect a full medical history, and refer you to a heart doctor (cardiologist) if needed.

What kind of help is there for heart problems?

Treatment depends on what is causing the symptoms:

- If chest pain is from muscles or nerves, anti-inflammatory medicines like ibuprofen may help.
- Children with congenital heart defects may need medicine, surgery, or procedures to help their heart work properly.
- Children with electrical heartbeat problems, called arrhythmias, may need medicine, a procedure, or guidance on which medications to avoid.

What other conditions are common in people with congenital heart disease?

People with CHD sometimes have genetic differences, such as Down syndrome or Turner syndrome.

Talking with a Medical Provider

When talking with medical providers or specialists, you might want to:

- **Bring and take notes:** Share all symptoms and concerns as well as when they started. Take notes during the appointment and ask for the visit summary before you leave.
- **Ask questions like:**
 - “Are there any activity restrictions?”
 - “Will this impact growth or development?”
 - “How should we be monitoring and treating this condition?”

What You Can Do at Home

Getting help can take time. While waiting for appointments, it may help to:

- **Stay active:** Exercise is good for the heart and fun for the family – just be sure to follow whatever guidelines your medical provider recommends.
- **Manage stress:** Developing healthy coping skills is important for your child, and you!
- **Follow a routine:** Eating right, brushing teeth, and getting good sleep are all important daily habits that support heart health.

Learning about heart problems and getting help is a journey. You’re not alone.

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About This Series

This series of handouts on health conditions was written by clinicians in Weill Cornell Medicine’s Pediatric Mental Health Integration Program, partners in the ACT for Youth CYSHCN Program Center of Excellence at Cornell University.

