



Want to know more about Rheumatic Heart Disease?

Rheumatic heart disease (or RHD) is a serious heart problem that involves damage to the valves in the heart after acute rheumatic fever (or ARF).

What is rheumatic heart disease?

Rheumatic heart disease is damage to the valves in the heart that develops after the heart has been affected during an illness called acute rheumatic fever. Acute rheumatic fever starts after an infection in the throat or on the skin (Strep A infection).

Strep A infections can cause acute rheumatic fever, and acute rheumatic fever can cause rheumatic heart disease.

What happens to the heart in rheumatic heart disease?

The heart valves can be stretched and scarred. If a valve is stretched it does not close properly and some blood leaks backwards as it moves through the heart. If a valve is scarred it may not open properly, which means the blood flow is blocked as blood moves through the heart.

What are the symptoms of rheumatic heart disease?

For some people there are no symptoms. Some people have a heart murmur which is an abnormal heartbeat sound (the doctor can hear it when they listen to the heart). As rheumatic heart disease gets worse, symptoms can include chest pain, tiredness, shortness of breath, and swelling of the feet and legs.

How do I know if I have rheumatic heart disease?

Rheumatic heart disease is diagnosed using an ultrasound machine (called an echocardiogram or echo). If your doctor thinks you might have rheumatic heart disease they will arrange for you to have an echocardiogram. The echocardiogram machine can see the valves; how they are moving, and if they are damaged. It can also see how the blood is flowing through the heart.

What treatment is available for rheumatic heart disease?

Treatment for rheumatic heart disease depends on how bad the disease is and which heart valves are affected. Rheumatic heart disease can be managed with medications and regular check-ups, but for some people, surgery is needed to fix or replace the valves. Treatment should always be planned and managed by the patient and doctor together.

Why do I need to have Bicillin needles every four weeks?

People who have acute rheumatic fever or rheumatic heart disease need regular Bicillin needles to stop Strep A germs and stop acute rheumatic fever coming back. Each time a person has acute rheumatic fever, the heart valve problems can get worse.

How long do I have to have Bicillin needles for if I have rheumatic heart disease?

How long you need needles for depends on how old you are, how severe the rheumatic heart disease is, and if acute rheumatic fever comes back. Planning Bicillin needles should be done by the patient and the doctor together.

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

Being pregnant puts more pressure on the heart, mainly because there is more blood in the body and the heart needs to work hard for mother and baby. Many women with rheumatic heart disease can have safe pregnancies. However, some women are at higher risk of complications during pregnancy and delivery, so all women with rheumatic heart disease should talk to their doctor before pregnancy and see the doctor during their pregnancy, so that they stay healthy and have a healthy baby.



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What are the possible complications of rheumatic heart disease?

Complications including heart failure, inflammation of the heart, irregular heartbeat, complications with pregnancy and delivery, stroke, and early death.

How can I avoid or minimise complications of rheumatic heart disease?

To reduce the risk of complications 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 your Bicillin injection on time
- 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 and COVID-19 vaccine
- Get a flu vaccine every year
- Talk to your doctor about pregnancy planning and safety during pregnancies.

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

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

Is rheumatic heart disease preventable?

Yes, rheumatic heart disease is preventable. Healthy skin means no Strep A infections (sores) and no acute rheumatic fever. No acute rheumatic fever means no rheumatic heart disease. For people who have acute rheumatic fever, regular Bicillin needles help prevent rheumatic heart disease.

Does everyone with acute rheumatic fever get rheumatic heart disease?

No. However, people with acute rheumatic fever who do not have their treatment are more likely to develop rheumatic heart disease.

Who gets rheumatic heart disease?

In Australia, most young people with rheumatic heart disease are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who live in northern and central Australian communities where there is social, cultural and economic inequity, household crowding, and barriers to accessing health care. There are also some older non-Indigenous Australians living with rheumatic heart.

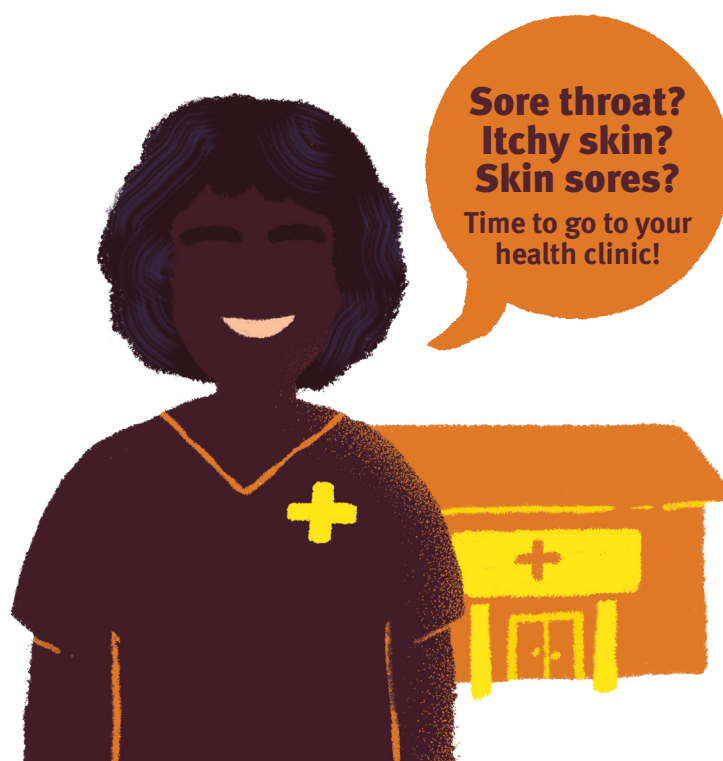
Around the world, there are high numbers of people in Africa, the Middle East, Central and South Asia and the South Pacific living with RHD.

Is rheumatic heart disease contagious?

No, rheumatic heart disease is not contagious, which means you cannot catch it from another person (and it cannot be passed from mother to baby). However, Strep A infections including sore throats and skin sores are contagious. Handwashing and sleeping separately is recommended for people who have Strep A infections.

Can I lead a normal life if I have rheumatic heart disease?

People who have control of their disease, have their treatment, and see their doctor regularly, can lead a normal life.



Let's end Rheumatic Heart Disease
Together we can protect young people's hearts



Queensland
Government