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What is a heart valve repair or replacement?

Heart valve repair or replacement surgery is a treatment option for valvular heart disease. When heart valves become damaged or diseased, they may not function properly. Conditions which may cause heart valve dysfunction are valvular stenosis and valvular insufficiency (regurgitation).

When one (or more) valve(s) becomes stenotic (stiff), the heart muscle must work harder to pump the blood through the valve. Some reasons why heart valves become stenotic include infection (such as rheumatic fever or staphylococcus infections) and aging. If one or more valves become insufficient (leaky), blood leaks backwards, which means that less blood is pumped in the proper direction. The physician may decide that the diseased valve(s) needs to be surgically repaired or replaced.

Traditionally, repair or replacement of heart valves has involved open-heart surgery, which means that the chest is opened in the operating room and the heart stopped for a time so that the surgeon may repair or replace the valve(s).

Newer, less invasive techniques have been developed to replace or repair heart valves. Minimally-invasive procedures in which the incision is much smaller often mean less pain post-operatively and shorter hospital stays. Valvuloplasty is another method that may be used to treat valve stenosis in some cases.

The diseased valve may be repaired using a ring to support a person's own valve, or the entire valve may be removed and replaced by an artificial valve. Artificial valves may be mechanical (made of metal or plastic) or tissue (made from animal valves or human valves taken from cadavers).

What are the valves of the heart?

In order to keep the blood flowing forward during its journey through the heart, there are valves between each of the heart's pumping chambers:

- tricuspid valve - located between the right atrium and the right ventricle
- pulmonary (or pulmonic) valve - located between the right ventricle and the pulmonary artery
- mitral valve - located between the left atrium and the left ventricle
- aortic valve - located between the left ventricle and the aorta

What are the symptoms of a damaged or diseased heart valve?

If the heart valve(s) becomes damaged or diseased, a person may experience the following symptoms:

- dizziness
- chest pain
- breathing difficulties
- palpitations
- edema (swelling) of the feet, ankles, or abdomen
- rapid weight gain due to fluid retention

Reasons for the Procedure

Valve repair or replacement surgery is performed to correct the problems caused by one or more diseased heart valves.

There may be other reasons for your physician to recommend heart valve repair or replacement surgery.

What are the risks of a valve replacement?

Possible risks associated with heart valve repair or replacement surgery include, but are not limited to, the following:

- bleeding during or after the surgery
- blood clots that can cause heart attack, stroke, or lung problems
- infection at the incision site
- pneumonia
- breathing problems
- dysrhythmias/arrhythmias (abnormal heart rhythms)

If you are pregnant or suspect that you may be pregnant, you should notify your physician. If you are lactating, or breastfeeding, you should notify your physician.

Patients who are allergic or sensitive to medications, contrast dyes, iodine, shellfish, or latex should notify their physician.

There may be other risks depending upon your specific medical condition. Be sure to discuss any concerns with your physician prior to the procedure.