

Myocarditis



What Is It?

Myocarditis is an inflammation of the heart muscle. It can be caused by viral, bacterial, or parasitic infections, drugs or chemicals, connective tissue or auto-immune disorders, or by radiation.

Myocarditis may occur during or after affliction with a variety of diseases, such as rheumatic fever, polio, rubella, and influenza. Its most common cause is a viral infection (e.g. from adenovirus, coxsackie virus, or echovirus).

Myocarditis is a fairly rare disorder, affecting males more often than females (1.5 to 1).

What Are Its Effects?

The inflammation of the heart muscle affects the middle layer of muscle tissue, between the endocardium (the smooth inner lining of the heart valves and chambers) and the pericardium (the double layered outer membrane that surrounds the heart).

A person with myocarditis may experience no symptoms. It may only be diagnosed after detection during an electrocardiogram.

In other cases, the condition may cause moderate to severe chest pain (perhaps even mimicking a heart attack), fever, joint pain, fatigue, palpitations or rapid heartbeat, decreased urination, fainting or dizziness, and even sudden death.

Infants with Myocarditis may show symptoms such as fever, cyanosis (blue-baby syndrome), reluctance to feed, and/or breathing problems. Myocarditis does damage to the muscle cells of the heart. This may result in a disorder known as Dilated Cardiomyopathy, in which the ventricles, or pumping chambers of the heart, become enlarged, sometimes resulting in congestive heart failure.

Myocarditis can cause irregular heartbeats, such as arrhythmias or heart block, in which the pumping of the heart chambers becomes out of synch. It may also lead to Pericarditis - the inflammation of the heart's outer membrane.

How Is It Treated?

In order to treat Myocarditis, the specific cause must be identified. Cultures, biopsies, electrocardiograms, echocardiograms - any or all may be used to determine the reason for inflammation.

There is no direct treatment for Myocarditis. However, antibiotics may reduce the inflammation in cases of bacterial infection. The symptoms may be treated with analgesics and anti-inflammatory drugs, such as steroids. Medications to treat irregular heartbeats (arrhythmias) may also be necessary. If there is heart block, a temporary artificial pacemaker may be used. Also, blood thinners (anticoagulants) may be prescribed to reduce the risk of blood clots.

To reduce the strain on the heart, bed rest is often required, and oxygen may be given in cases of congestive heart failure. A low sodium diet may also be prescribed.

In very severe cases, involving fulminant (sudden and severe) heart failure, which is fatal if left untreated, a heart transplant may be necessary.

The recovery time and risk of complications from Myocarditis depends on its cause. In most cases, however, complete recovery may be expected.