

## Health

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### MVP: The Heart of the Matter

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Most people give little thought to their heart as it goes about steadily pumping blood through their bodies. But those diagnosed with Mitral Valve Prolapse (MVP) -- or suffering the fatigue, shortness of breath, anxiety and even panic attacks associated with Mitral Valve Prolapse Syndrome (MVPS) -- are as attuned to the staccato of their hearts as they are of a full bladder or a rumbling stomach.

Sixty percent of those with MVP -- also known as Barlow's syndrome, systolic click-murmur syndrome or floppy valve syndrome -- will never realize it because they lack symptoms. By chance, they may discover their heart's mitral valve is structurally abnormal. The condition is quite common, affecting approximately 2 to 4 percent of the population. In most cases it does not affect heart function. But some with MVP experience recurrent chest pain, dizziness and migraine headaches. Even worse, 1 percent of the 15 million people estimated to have MVPS find their quality of life so diminished they require medication and/or surgery to repair or replace the mitral valve.

#### Cause and Effect?

There is considerable debate within the medical community as to whether the tiny mitral valve is the catalyst behind the symptoms. Dr. Ehsam Rahman, a cardiologist with Christiana Care, is unconvinced. "Sometimes patients with MVP have shortness of breath and panic attacks, which we can't quite explain by the amount of valve problem that we see," he says.

What is agreed upon is how the mitral valve channels blood flow through the heart. The right side of the heart receives blood from the body and pumps it to the lungs to pick up oxygen. When the blood reaches the left side of the heart, it passes from the upper (atrium) chamber to the lower (ventricle) chamber via the two fibrous leaflets that form the mitral valve.

Think of the valve as a parachute. When the ventricle chamber contracts, pushing the blood into the body, the leaflets are supposed to snap shut. But if the leaflets are too large (too much fabric in the parachute), or if the "strings" that connect the parachute are too long,



#### More info

**The symptoms** associated with Mitral Valve Prolapse Syndrome (MVPS) include fatigue, chest pain, irregular heart beat, high blood pressure, anxiety, depression, shortness of breath, panic attacks, shakiness, difficulty sleeping, intestinal or stomach trouble and dizzy spells. Doctors are still in the dark as to why the symptoms occur, but they can diagnose if you have a structurally abnormal mitral valve using an echocardiogram, a test that uses sound waves to view the interior of the heart.

#### Ways to diminish the symptoms if you are diagnosed with MVP:

**Eliminate triggers that stimulate the ANS**, such as caffeine and sugar

**Don't use tobacco products or abuse alcohol**

the leaflets bulge or prolapse, preventing a tight seal. So those with MVP may feel palpitations or tachycardia (faster heart rate than normal) even when they are at rest.

But there's good news: prolapsing mitral valves do not tend to degenerate over time, says Rahman. "MVP is not dangerous. If an irregular heartbeat is connected to the MVP, it is not a serious condition," he said.

Heart palpitations can be caused by many factors other than MVP, including medication, anxiety, caffeine, appetite suppressants, congenital heart disease, an overactive thyroid and even nicotine. Chest pain associated with MVP may be sharp or dull and last from a few seconds to several hours.

Using a stethoscope, doctors will hear a telltale "click" if the leaflets are closing improperly. An echocardiogram, a simple non-invasive test that uses high-frequency sound waves to visualize the anatomy and function of the heart, will confirm the diagnosis.

### Sensitive Wiring?

There is speculation that MVPS is tied to the autonomic nervous system (ANS). Symptoms often first occur with childbirth, a severe viral illness or an emotional stressor such as change in marital status or job pressure, according to the Mitral Valve Prolapse Center of Alabama.

It's interesting that the ANS (which manages our cardiovascular systems, gastrointestinal, urinary and bowel functions, temperature regulation, reproduction and metabolic and endocrine systems) is also responsible for our "flight or fight" response to stress. When the 'gas' or 'brake' components of the ANS get out of whack, dysfunction follows.

Those with MVP seem somehow to be wired differently; their autonomic response can be much more volatile and unstable, says Ronald Hoffman, author of "Natural Therapies for Mitral Valve Prolapse: How Diet and Nutritional Supplements Can Ease the Symptoms of This Common Disorder."

"If your sympathetic system is aroused, you can suddenly feel crushing chest pain with your heartbeat racing and pounding," he says. "Certain people with [MVP] sometimes experience this with no apparent warning or immediate threat."

Those who become overly sensitive to their heartbeats may set in motion a circle of fear that leads to recurring panic attacks and full-blown depression. "We refer to this as somatic preoccupation," says Lyn Frederickson, MSN, author of "Confronting Mitral Valve Prolapse Syndrome."

"The goal of patients with MVP is to break this cycle by whatever means possible," she says. This may include change of diet, adding aerobic exercise and adopting a positive mental attitude.

Pam Carlson, a 42-year-old professional living in Claymont, has MVP. She first noticed rapid heartbeats during high school. Carlson has recurrent gastro-intestinal problems, fatigue and headaches. She has experienced five

**Enjoy high-protein snacks** such as cheese or peanut butter crackers

**Drink plenty of fluids.** Many of the symptoms of MVP, including dizziness, weakness and feeling faint are due to low blood pressure and low blood volume

**Exercise.** Although some MVP patients with left ventricle enlargement or dysfunction are restricted from competitive sports, most benefit from regular aerobic activity such as walking, running and swimming

**Get sufficient sleep**

**Increase your intake** of magnesium, calcium and vitamin D

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debilitating panic attacks, the last one in 1993, but therapy and medication restored her quality of life.

"I thought I was losing my mind; I had a sense of impending doom," she says. "The doctors didn't seem to be doing a lot back then (early 80s), so I went to a psychologist. It took me years to get over the fear of having panic attacks."

Carlson is a tall, slender woman, as are most MVP patients. Connective tissue may be the reason, explains Rahman. "Connective tissue is what determines if we're tall or fat. The mitral valve is made of connective tissue."

## Lurking Danger

If you are diagnosed as having MVP, ask your doctor if you also have mitral regurgitation. This means your "leaky" mitral valve is allowing blood to leak back into the atrium chamber. If so, you are at risk of developing endocarditis, an infection of the heart's inner lining or valves.

Mitral regurgitation affects only 5 to 7 percent of women between the ages of 14 and 30, but it occurs in roughly two out of every 1,000 people. Mitral regurgitation requires the use of antibiotics before dental or surgical procedures that may cause bleeding, according to the American Medical Association. The standard medication prior to dental work is two grams of Amoxicillin orally one hour before procedure, or 600 mg. of Clindamycin for those allergic to penicillin. As always, check with your doctor and get tested for MVP and mitral regurgitation before taking any medication.

Allan Goldfeder, DMD, estimates that 1 to 2 percent of his patients take antibiotics before dental cleanings, due to the bacteria that enters the bloodstream as plaque is pushed around. "The rule is that if you have MVP without regurgitation, you're okay," adds John Burke, DDS, from his Wilmington office. "Some patients come in saying, 'I have a heart murmur.' We say, 'When was your last checkup?' If it wasn't recent, we say they need to get some testing before we do any work on them. Heart valve infections are a lot more common than people realize."

Three to 5 percent of his patients are pre-medicated for cleanings, extractions and root canals. Burke also stresses the importance of maintaining good oral health through regular brushing and flossing.

Endocarditis may develop suddenly or over time. A running fever is often the first symptom, followed by loss of appetite, headache and night sweats. And small, dark lines called splinter hemorrhages may appear under the fingernails, according to the National Library of Medicine.

With significant backflow, the heart may pump harder to try to compensate for the decreased blood flow to the body. If severe enough, mitral regurgitation can lead to enlargement of the cardiac chambers, weakening of the heart muscle and ultimately, to heart failure.

Fortunately, this does not affect the majority of MVP patients.

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