

Script – Print – Don't miss a beat when it comes to heart valve disease

Heart valve disease, which happens when one or more of your heart valves don't work properly, is becoming an increasing problem among older adults.

According to the American College of Cardiology, every year about five million people in the country are diagnosed with valvular heart disease (VHD), with nearly 25,000 people dying from it.

February 22 is National Heart Valve Disease Awareness Day, a day during American Heart Month to raise awareness of the risks, symptoms and treatment options available for patients.

"Valvular heart disease is an important issue to recognize and treat, given the repercussions they may have for patients' health," says Alejandro Aquino, MD, a structural heart specialist with OSF Cardiovascular Institute. "We currently estimate more than 2% of patients have some degree of valvular heart disease, and it's a growing problem and a problem that we understand is unrecognized and undertreated."

Anyone can experience a heart valve issue and the risk increases as you get older. You may be at a greater risk if you've had a heart attack or heart failure or have a risk for coronary heart disease.

"There are four valves in the heart," says Dr. Aquino. "The tricuspid valve, pulmonic valve, mitral valve, and aortic valve. And they function as one-way doors keeping the blood going from chamber to chamber as it returns from the body, travels to the lungs to exchange for oxygen, and then returns to the heart and then ultimately is pumped to the body to deliver oxygen to all the tissues."

HVD can develop quickly or over a long time. Symptoms may include:

- Shortness of breath
- Chest pain
- Fatigue
- Dizziness or fainting
- Fever
- Rapid weight gain
- Irregular heartbeat

"Oftentimes, these changes are subtle, and the first people to notice are actually the patients' families," says Dr. Aquino. "And when they come to visit, they might be the person to say 'hey, you know my dad or mom is not quite moving as well as they did six months ago, or last time I saw them. They were doing a lot more around the house or a lot more for fun or going out of the house for hobbies.' So, again, it's important to recognize that some of these symptoms can be quite subtle. Often a lot of my patients come, and they say 'well, I thought I was just getting older.' When in reality it is their valve encroaching on their ability to do certain activities."

HVD is treated either by medication or if it's causing severe symptoms, surgery may be the better option. Dr. Aquino says recent advancements have given patients the option of replacing a valve with a catheter instead of surgery. He adds that it's best to be seen by a cardiologist to make those determinations.

"From my personal perspective, I think the earlier is better," says Dr. Aquino. "Most of my patients or a lot of patients that are referred to me have only mild or moderate forms of valvular heart disease. However, it's important for them to recognize exactly what's going on with their heart. And it's important for us to establish a surveillance plan so that when the time comes for there to be a fix, the patient is fully engaged and understands the process."

The bottom line is to listen to your body. If you notice or experience any abnormal symptoms, contact your physician as soon as possible.

"The most important message is awareness," says Dr. Aquino. "Awareness of the prevalence of valvular heart disease, awareness of the important repercussions they may have to your health, of the importance of being tied into a cardiovascular specialist to perform initial evaluation and determine an appropriate surveillance or treatment plan. If you have any concerns, please contact your primary care provider."

For more information on heart care, visit [OSF HealthCare](#).