

TRANSCRIPT OF MEDIA- Lindsey Graham's death highlights rare heart emergency

Dr. Bill Novak, MD, cardiologist OSF HealthCare

Although uncommon, with an incidence of about 3 to 3.5 cases per 100,000 people, Dr. Novak says aortic dissection can quickly become fatal if it is not recognized and treated.

"The aorta is the main artery that leaves your heart, and if you have a tear in the aorta, it can be potentially life-threatening. It can cause a heart attack. It can cause stroke. It can cause heart failure, rupture of the aorta, and sudden death." (:18)

Many aortic dissection symptoms overlap with other medical emergencies. Actor John Ritter died after his aortic dissection was misdiagnosed and it was treated as a heart attack.

"It's dangerous because it's relatively uncommon," says Dr. Novak. "It can sometimes be a challenge to diagnose since a lot of the symptoms overlap with heart attack and other conditions such as pulmonary embolism. And it's obviously a potentially life-threatening type of a problem." (:21)

Dr. Novak says people at the greatest risk include older adults.

"How old you are is important. That increases your risk. If you smoke, that's going to increase your risk and obviously treating your cholesterol is going to reduce the chance you're going to develop certain types of plaque in your arteries, which can also put you at a higher risk for having this problem." (:23)

There are other people, Dr. Novak points out, who need to be monitored regularly, including those with conditions such as [Marfan syndrome](#), [Ehlers-Danlos syndrome](#), and [Loeys-Dietz syndrome](#), which weaken blood vessel walls and are the primary cause of aortic dissection in younger individuals.

"If you do have some risk factors such as a bicuspid valve, connective tissue disease, or an aneurysm, those things do have to be monitored on a regular basis." (:12)