

Cardiomyopathy

What is cardiomyopathy?

Cardiomyopathy is a disease of the heart muscle. The heart muscle gets bigger, thick, or stiff. This can weaken the heart and make it hard for the heart to pump blood.

There are 3 main types of cardiomyopathy:

- **Dilated cardiomyopathy.** As the heart muscle weakens, it is less able to pump enough blood to the body. Because the heart can't pump as well, the main pumping chamber of the heart (the left ventricle) fills with blood and cannot empty. The extra blood in the left ventricle causes the heart muscle to stretch, just like a balloon expands when you put air into it. The heart slowly gets bigger over several weeks to months.
- **Hypertrophic cardiomyopathy (HCM).** The heart muscle cells get bigger. This makes the walls of the heart muscle thick. Thick walls are usually very stiff, making it hard for the heart to pump well.
- **Restrictive cardiomyopathy.** The heart muscle gets very stiff. The stiffness makes it hard for the heart to fill with blood and pump properly.

What is the cause?

The heart muscle may be weakened by many things, such as:

- Heart attacks
- Coronary artery disease (CAD)
- Untreated high blood pressure
- Chronic illness, such as diabetes or thyroid disease
- A genetic problem inherited from your parents
- Cocaine or heavy alcohol use
- Infection, especially by a virus
- Some cancer treatments

Often what causes the heart to get bigger and weaker is not known.

What are the symptoms?

Cardiomyopathy may not cause symptoms. If it does, some possible symptoms are:

- Chest pain, especially after physical activity or heavy meals
- Shortness of breath
- Swelling of the legs or ankles
- Tiredness
- Dizziness
- Fainting during physical activity

How is it diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will ask about your symptoms and medical history and examine you. Tests may include:

- Chest X-ray
- An ECG (also called an EKG or electrocardiogram), which measures and records your heartbeat. You may have an ECG while you are resting or while you exercise on a treadmill. You may also be asked to wear a small portable ECG monitor for a few days or sometimes a couple weeks.
- An echocardiogram, which uses sound waves (ultrasound) to see how well your heart is pumping and can show areas of heart muscle that are thick
- Angiogram, which is a series of X-rays taken after your healthcare provider injects a special dye into your blood vessels to show the walls of the arteries and any blockage

Your provider may suggest testing other members of your family if he or she thinks that you may have an inherited form of cardiomyopathy.

How is it treated?

Treatment depends on the type of cardiomyopathy you have and what caused it. Medicines that may be prescribed include:

- Beta blocker or calcium channel blocker to relax the heart muscle. This helps lower blood pressure and heart rate so that the heart does not have to work as hard.
- Vasodilator to open up the blood vessels and let more blood flow through. This helps lower blood pressure so the heart does not have to work as hard.
- ACE inhibitor to relax blood vessels and lower blood pressure. This helps the heart to pump more blood out to the body.
- Diuretic (water pill) to help your body get rid of the extra fluid that can build up when the heart does not pump well.
- Blood thinner (anticoagulant) to help prevent blood clots that could block the arteries and cause a stroke.

Procedures that may be used to treat cardiomyopathy include:

- Removal of a piece of heart muscle (a procedure called myectomy) with a heart catheter or surgery
- Insertion of an artificial pacemaker or an implantable cardioverter-defibrillator (ICD) to treat abnormal heart rhythms

How can I take care of myself?

- Take your medicines regularly, carefully following your healthcare provider's instructions.
- Weigh yourself regularly and let your provider know if you suddenly gain weight.
- Avoid salty foods and eat a healthy diet with lots of fruits and vegetables.

- Ask your provider:
 - How and when you will hear your test results
 - How long it will take to recover
 - How much fluid you should drink every day.
 - Ask your provider how much you can exercise and try to remain active. Find out what activities you should avoid. For some types of cardiomyopathy certain sports or activities are not recommended.
 - How to take care of yourself at home
 - What symptoms or problems you should watch for and what to do if you have them

Make sure you know when you should come back for a checkup.

How can I help prevent cardiomyopathy?

- If you have high cholesterol or hypertension, take the medicines that have been prescribed for you to treat these conditions.
- Have a healthy lifestyle with regular exercise and a healthy diet (high in fruits and vegetables).
- If you smoke, try to quit. Tell your healthcare provider if you need help quitting.
- Follow any other recommendations from your healthcare provider.

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