

Lower Your Risk for Endocarditis

For congenital heart patients

This section of the Congenital Heart Conditions notebook explains endocarditis, how it occurs, how to prevent it, and signs to watch for.

What is endocarditis?

Endocarditis is an infection of the inner lining of the heart (*endocardium*) or heart valves. It is usually caused by bacteria (germs).

How does it occur?

- Bacteria may grow in areas where there is *turbulent blood flow*, where blood flow speeds up or slows down. Bacteria may damage the heart tissue or spread to the body through the bloodstream.
- Valves, tubes, patches, or other materials that were placed during heart procedures can become infected.
- Skin infections or dental work can send germs into the bloodstream. (See “How to Prevent Endocarditis” on page 2.)

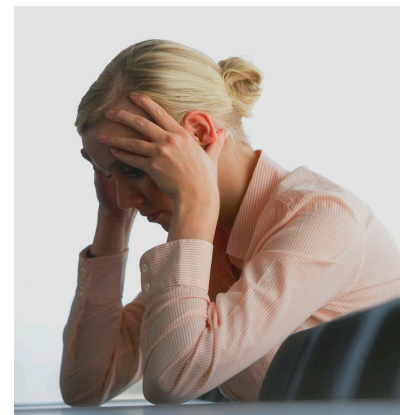
How is it treated?

A person who has endocarditis usually needs to stay in the hospital for a long time. They are most often treated with *antibiotics* (medicines that kill germs). Sometimes, surgery may be needed.

What are the signs?

Tell your healthcare provider if you have any of these signs of endocarditis:

- Ongoing fever, feeling ill, or cold symptoms that won't go away
- Pale skin
- Night sweats
- Unusual tiredness
- Weight loss
- Muscle or joint pain, or body aches



Tell your provider if you have any signs of endocarditis.

How can I prevent endocarditis?

The best way to prevent endocarditis is to take good care of your teeth, skin, and nails.

Teeth

Poor dental care or issues that occur during dental work are the main way bacteria get into the bloodstream. To avoid this problem:

- Keep up to date with teeth cleaning. We suggest seeing your dentist every 6 months. Visit your dentist sooner if you have a tooth that is broken, bleeding, or painful.
- For some heart conditions, we advise taking antibiotics before dental visits, especially if you have had:
 - Valve replacement(s)
 - A past episode of endocarditis
 - Recent heart surgery or procedure
 - Unrepaired heart defects or low oxygen saturation (*cyanosis*)

Ask your provider if you need to take antibiotics before dental visits. If you are planning to have a heart procedure, ask if you need clearance from your dentist first.

Skin and Nails

Your skin is a natural barrier against infection. If that barrier is compromised, you may be at higher risk for infection (including endocarditis).

Prevent and treat cuts and scrapes, and avoid picking at your skin, nails, or scabs. If you notice any redness, swelling, or discharge from your skin or nails, contact your healthcare provider.

Tattoos and Piercings

It is possible that getting tattoos, piercings, and other body art may increase your risk of endocarditis.

We do not usually advise taking antibiotics before getting tattoos or piercings. But, we suggest you proceed with caution. Choose businesses that use clean and safe practices. Always ask your provider if you have any questions.

Questions?

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or healthcare provider if you have questions or concerns.

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