

What You Should Know About Heart Valve Disease

(NAPS)—Even serious cases of heart valve disease can occur without symptoms or go unnoticed or be mistaken for other conditions because symptoms develop slowly.

One Man's Story

Al Ridgely figured his increasing shortness of breath and lagging stamina were symptoms of his emphysema and getting older, until a fainting episode led doctors to discover he was one of the 2.5 percent of Americans with heart valve disease (HVD).

Feb. 22 is national Heart Valve Awareness Day and the American Heart Association is working to raise awareness about the symptoms, risks and treatments for the condition, in which one or more of the heart valves have been damaged, disrupting blood flow by not opening or closing properly. HVD becomes more prevalent with age, affecting one in 10 adults age 75 and older.

Ridgely, who is from Traverse City, Michigan, underwent open-heart surgery to repair both his mitral and tricuspid valves and encourages others to talk to their health care providers about any health changes, rather than just assume it is part of aging.

"It never entered my mind that I could have heart disease," said Ridgely, who is now 83. "As I get older, it can be hard to recognize what's aging and what's something more serious."

Advice From A Health Care Practitioner

Romeatrius Moss, DNP, RN, an AHA volunteer, said understanding HVD and making lifestyle changes are crucial for protecting heart health, especially in African Americans, where the disease is more prevalent.

"In the black community, we need to understand what our risks are and follow up with necessary testing," said Dr. Moss, founder, president and chief executive of Black Nurses Rock, the nation's largest minority nursing association.

While HVD is relatively common, three out of four Americans reported knowing little to nothing about the condition, and six in 10 heart valve patients didn't have or didn't recognize their symptoms, according to surveys released by the Alliance for Aging Research.

Medical advancements mean HVD can often be successfully treated either through repair or replacement; however, an estimated 25,000 people die from the condition each year.

According to the American Heart Association, some people, even those



Recognizing risks and symptoms, and following up with health care providers, are crucial for treating heart valve disease, advises Romeatrius Moss, DNP, RN.

with serious HVD, may have no symptoms, while others have symptoms that change very slowly over time or come on quickly. Symptoms can include chest pain or palpitations, shortness of breath, fatigue, weakness or inability to maintain regular activity level, light-headedness or loss of consciousness, or swollen ankles, feet or abdomen.

In addition to age, risk factors for HVD include a history of rheumatic fever or infective endocarditis, heart attack, heart failure, arrhythmia, or previous heart valve conditions from birth, called congenital heart defects.

Those previously diagnosed with a heart murmur, mitral valve prolapse or other mild form of HVD should maintain regular checkups with a health care provider and watch for any changes should the condition worsen over time, Dr. Moss said.

She was diagnosed with a heart murmur as a child, but didn't realize it could pose significant health risks until a physical for the Air Force revealed she had mitral valve prolapse. Thirteen years later, Dr. Moss gets regular checkups with her health care provider and watches for signs that her condition may be worsening. She also exercises regularly and watches her diet to minimize her risks.

"Know your body and know how you can protect yourself," Moss said. "Sometimes, patients have to lead this discussion and as nurses we try to help our patients advocate for themselves."

Learn More

For further fact about heart valve disease, including risk factors, symptoms and treatment, visit www.heart.org/heartvalves.