

Endocarditis

When internal heart defects are exposed to certain bacteria, bad things can happen. A condition called Endocarditis can develop and have lethal consequences.

Endocarditis is an infection or inflammation of the internal lining of the heart. It's caused by bacteria attaching themselves onto damaged or defective areas inside the heart. Usually, the infection causes destruction of the heart valves, and the heart no longer works properly. Other complications can include stroke, as parts of the bacterial colony break off and create a clot in the brain. Similarly, fragments can break off and create blockages in the lungs.

Not all bacteria are capable of causing this damage. Most notably, the bacteria of the mouth and gut are usually involved. Anytime these bacteria are introduced into the bloodstream, there is a risk of infection in the damaged heart. Infection can come from such routine activities as brushing your teeth, or even chewing. Usually, the immune system destroys the offending bacteria, or it passes harmlessly through the heart. Sometimes, it lodges into the defective heart lining and Endocarditis results.

Endocarditis is extremely rare in someone with a healthy heart. Patients with defective heart valves (ie Mitral Valve Prolapse), damaged heart valves (ie Rheumatic Heart Disease), artificial heart valves, a history of IV drug use, or previous heart damage due to endocarditis, are at great risk of developing this condition.

Of special concern, the bacterial colonies forming inside the heart are often resistant to antibiotic therapy. In these situations, even your own body fails to respond with white blood cells. Treatment requires weeks of powerful IV antibiotics to overcome the disease.

Prevention is the easiest and safest way to control the disease.

If you have experienced internal heart malformation, or damage to the lining of your heart, you have probably been told to take antibiotics before dental treatment. For some procedures, this is highly recommended. If your dental care is likely to introduce a large number of bacteria into your bloodstream, you should take the antibiotics your MD has prescribed.

Another safeguard against casual introduction of bacteria into your bloodstream, and running the risk of developing Endocarditis, is to maintain excellent oral hygiene. By removing the bacteria from your mouth (brushing and flossing), you lower your risk for infection.

Bacterial Endocarditis, The Disease, Treatment, and Prevention, [Christopher H. Cabell](#), MD; [Elias Abrutyn](#), MD; [Adolf W. Karchmer](#), MD

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