

MAIL TODAY

GOT A SORE THROAT!

(CAREFUL, IT MAY DAMAGE YOUR HEART)

By RITUPARNA MUKHERJEE

Seemingly minor throat infections may lead to heart valve disease, a condition that occurs in more women than men

ALL OF US are guilty of ignoring what seem to be minor health issues, without realising how serious the consequences of our neglect may be. How many of us consult a doctor every time we have a sore throat, for example? Maybe we would, if we knew that a bacterial throat infection can actually lead to heart disease at a later stage in life, especially if you are a woman. Why women are more prone to rheumatic heart valve disease is a mystery. What makes matters worse is the fact that this potentially fatal condition rears its head only when the body is under extreme stress, such as during pregnancy.

A bacterial infection

RHEUMATIC heart valve disease is all too common in India and originates in a seemingly innocuous and common throat infection. "Antibodies produced by the body to fight this streptococcus bacterial infection react with the valves of the heart, resulting in this condition. Overcrowded living spaces and a lackadaisical approach to personal hygiene, this infection can facilitate the spread rapidly," says Dr Neeraj Bhalla, interventional cardiologist, Max Healthcare. It also affects other areas of the body apart from the heart such as joints, and the central nervous system. The infection causes inflammation of the tissues which can pose a serious problem, especially when the heart is involved.

The human heart is essentially a highly efficient pump with four chambers - each closed off by a one-way valve. The four valves- mitral, aortic, pulmonary and tricuspid- work together as the heart expands and contracts in sequence to keep the blood flowing the right way. Of these, the mitral and the aortic valves are commonly targeted by this infection. The mitral valve lets the blood in and the aortic acts as the outlet. "In heart valve disease the inflamed tissue prevents the flaps of the mitral valves from opening sufficiently or the flaps of the aortic valve from closing properly. It can also be a combination of the problem," says Dr Z S Meherwal, director and coordinator, department of cardiovascular surgery, Escorts Heart Institute.

Extensive damage

WHEN the valves are damaged, the flow of blood through the heart is hampered. If the mitral valve is affected it narrows, reducing the blood flow to the other chambers. The blood collects behind the valve, putting pressure on the heart. "If the flaps of the aortic valve do not close properly it leaks more blood which puts pressure on the arteries which supply blood to the lungs and on the lungs themselves. This excess blood also causes the heart chambers to enlarge eventu-

ally resulting in heart failure," says Dr Z S Meherwal. The blood passing through these valves gets infected too, and the infection takes root in the valves, forming abscesses in the heart, eroding the valve and ultimately travelling to the brain, adds Dr H K Chopra, cardiologist, Moolchand Heart Hospital. The symptoms of this infection usually go unnoticed until the body is under great stress and the heart has to pump faster to cope with the extra blood flow. This is why pregnancy exacerbates this condition, as the blood flow in the body increases by two thirds. Congestion of the lungs, giddi-

ness, swollen feet, palpitations, unexplained fatigue, fainting spells and occasional chest pains are symptoms of this disease. Any such symptoms should never be ignored and reported to the doctor immediately.

Treatment is crucial

"IF INDIAN women were more active, this disease may have manifested earlier in their lives but they are mostly sedentary by nature. But thanks to the gym culture, more people are reporting symptoms earlier even though the majority of women don't experience any serious problem till childbirth,"

says Dr Meherwal. An echocardiogram is done to ascertain the extent of damage to the heart and valves and treatment is then prescribed accordingly. "Preventing bacterial re-infection is very important and antibiotic and penicillin injections are prescribed for this. Those suffering from this disease can contract this infection through a simple dental procedure so without this measure the risk of re infection is very high," says Dr Bhalla. If infection has enlarged the chambers of the heart, diuretics may be needed to reduce the fluid collected in the tissues, thereby shrinking them and reducing the heart rate.

Replacing the valves

EARLY detection and treatment is crucial as the valves might need surgical repair or replacement. This is a tricky business as repairing the aortic valve is difficult because of its anatomy. The mitral valve can be repaired, provided the damage is detected in the initial stages. Depending on the age of the patient, either mechanical or tissue valves are used. This is because tissue valves are usually made from animal tissue and very rarely from human tissue and have a lifespan of 12 to 15 years after which they need replacement.

The operation is an expensive one, costing anywhere between Rs 3-4 lakh. "A second heart operation is a delicate and a risky procedure, and the expenses are doubled," says Dr Chopra. That is why tissue valves are used for those over 60 years of age, and mechanical valves for younger patients. There are other complications involved as well. A patient needs to take blood thinning tablets all his or her life to facilitate easy blood flow. Being artificial valves, there is a risk of abnormal blood flow and clots developing.

Blood thinners can also cause excess bleeding and clotting. "These medicines cannot be given to a woman planning a pregnancy as they can damage the foetus. They are also unsuitable for athletes as any injury might not heal easily thanks to the thinned blood. In these specific cases, the patients are given the option of a temporary tissue valve replacement to be substituted with a mechanical one later on in life," says Dr Meherwal.

Prevention better than cure

MANY diseases can be avoided by maintaining good hygiene, and washing hands before every meal. "Sneezing into handkerchiefs, washing hands after a day outdoors and generally maintaining good personal hygiene is very important and something most Indians ignore. Also, it is important to see a doctor if your throat is very sore, or you have the flu," says Dr Bhalla. Those who have valve disease need to ensure they do not miss regular checkups. "Women should watch out for recurrent throat infections and niggling joint pains- and immediately report them to a doctor. They could be signaling something far more sinister than a cold," says Dr Meherwal.

Rituparna.mukherjee@mailtoday.in



BENEFITS OF ANULOM VILOM

This asana is good for those with diabetes, heart problems, high BP, sinusitis, Parkinson's disease, arthritis, migraine and asthma

- Bend forefinger and middle finger of your right hand. Close your eyes and practice deep breathing.
- Close right nostril with thumb, place ring finger between eyebrows and inhale to count of 5.
- Close left nostril with ring finger. Hold breath for count of 10.
- Raise thumb to point between eyebrows, exhale slowly through right nostril to count of 10.
- Now breathe in again through right nostril to count of 5. Close right nostril with thumb and hold your breath for 10. Place ring finger between eyebrows and exhale through left nostril to count of 10.
- Repeat complete cycle for 2-5 minutes.

— content by yoga guru Bharat Thakur