



Rheumatic Heart Disease Awareness

Start from a young age

Healthcare Insight

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S I M E K A
HEALTH

member of  **Sanlam** group

Rheumatic Fever and Rheumatic Heart Disease Awareness Week 2-8 August

Over more than 25 years ago, the South African Department of Health declared the first week of August Rheumatic Fever Week.

Our hearts can beat about 3 billion times from birth to the age of 90 years.

Many things can go wrong with our hearts from a very young age, including with the heart muscle itself, with the valves that help blood flow, with the heart rhythm, and with the blood vessels that transport the blood.

Rheumatic Heart Disease (RHD) is a type of preventable heart disease not common in high income countries, but still affects millions of people and causes hundreds of thousands of deaths annually according to the South African Heart Foundation.

Acute rheumatic fever is an abnormal immune reaction to group A streptococcal bacterial infection. Acute rheumatic fever can easily be prevented by treating strep throat infection with a common antibiotic, but this is unfortunately not always possible in poverty ridden communities.

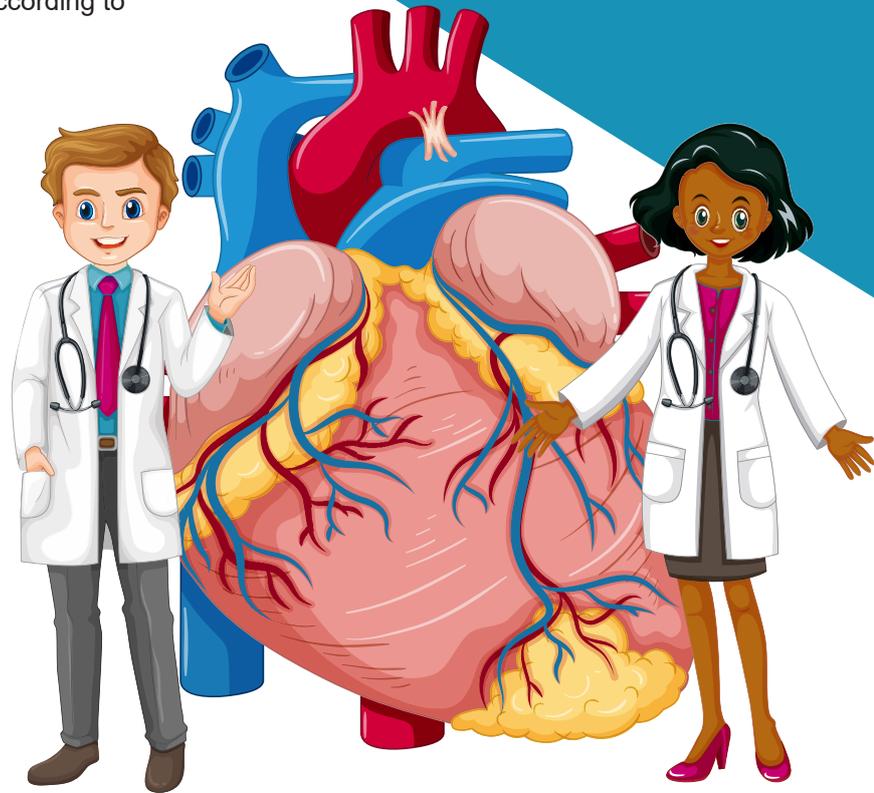
What exactly is RHD?

Rheumatic heart disease - is a condition in which the heart valves have been permanently damaged by rheumatic fever.

Rheumatic fever - is an inflammatory disease that can affect many connective tissues, especially in the heart and if left untreated, can cause:

- heart failure,
- arrhythmias,
- stroke, and
- endocarditis.

Rheumatic Heart Disease (RHD) is the most common type of heart disease known in children and young people below the age of 25 years and most commonly affects children between the ages of 5-15 years. However, it also occurs in young adults.



Symptoms to look out for...

The symptoms can be divided into two groups:

Acute rheumatic fever	Rheumatic heart disease
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sore throat• Joint pain• Fever• Skin rash• Uncontrollable movements• Changes in mood• Lumps under the skin• Shortness of breath / chest discomfort• Weakness	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Shortness of breath• Chest pain• Swelling• Heart palpitations• Breathless on exertion• Swelling• Fainting• Fever associated with infection of damaged heart valves

The streptococcal bacterial infection commonly infects the throat, causing pain or pain on swallowing with a fever higher than 38°C, leaving the patient feeling unwell. But, there are ways to diagnose and treat this disease. Some children or young adults who already have rheumatic fever, need continued medical care.

Ways in which RHD is diagnosed

Some tests may include:



1 | Physical examination

This may include taking your pulse to check your heart rate, rhythm and regularity. Listening to your lungs for abnormal breath sounds, or crackling sounds that may indicate signs of heart disease.

2 | Echocardiogram (echo)

An echocardiogram is a graphic outline of the heart's movement. During an echo test, ultrasound from a hand-held wand placed on your chest provides pictures of the heart's valves and chambers and helps the sonographer evaluate the pumping action of the heart.

3 | Electrocardiogram (ECG)

An electrocardiogram records the electrical signals in your heart. It's a common and painless test used to quickly detect heart problems and monitor your heart's health.

4 | Chest X-ray

A chest X-ray is useful for showing the size and shape of the heart and detecting chest disorders.

5 | Cardiac MRI

Cardiac magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) uses a powerful magnetic field, radio waves and a computer to produce detailed pictures of the structures within and around the heart in patients with both heart disease present at birth and heart diseases that develop after birth.

6 | Blood tests

There are a number of blood tests that can be done to rule out other causes of heart symptoms, and to measure different levels within the body that can affect the heart.

RHD treatment

Although RHD is not curable, it is preventable and treatable!

Some treatments include:

- Antibiotics (Penicillin is most commonly used and given as an injection every 3-4 weeks)
- Blood thinners
- Regular check-ups
- Surgery

Patients with severe rheumatic heart disease will often require surgery to replace or repair damaged heart valves. Depending on the severity of the disease, medication may also be needed to treat symptoms of heart failure or heart rhythm abnormalities.

The minimum treatment length according to the South African Heart Foundation is 10 years or until the age of 21, whichever is longer.

The important thing to remember is that rheumatic heart disease can be prevented by effective management of streptococcal sore throat. However treatment at this early stage is often not achieved due to time or money constraints in some instances.

Source
<https://www.heartfoundation.co.za>

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