



MITRAL VALVE PROLAPSE

■ WHAT IS MITRAL VALVE PROLAPSE?

The mitral valve is a heart valve with two tissue flaps, called leaflets, that open and close. It is located between the left upper chamber (atrium) and left lower chamber (ventricle) of the heart. Mitral valve prolapse occurs when the mitral valve bulges into the left atrium when the heart contracts (squeezes). This may keep the leaflets from closing properly. The result is a backward flow of blood into the left atrium. This is referred to as leaking or regurgitation. Most of the time, however, mitral valve prolapse causes no symptoms and no problems.

■ WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

Most people with mitral valve prolapse have no symptoms. However, some have brief periods of rapid heartbeat or skipped beats. Some people have sharp chest pains lasting seconds or minutes. Some people have shortness of breath when climbing stairs or with heavy exertion. You may notice symptoms more when you are physically active.

■ HOW IS IT DIAGNOSED?

Often mitral valve prolapse is discovered during a physical examination, when the doctor listens to your heart with a stethoscope. The valve leaflets create a “click” sound that the doctor may hear. If the valve leaks, the doctor may also hear a murmur. The doctor may ask you to stand, sit, lie down, or squat during your exam, so he or she can better hear the heart sounds.

An echocardiogram passes sound waves through the heart to create an image. It is the best test to diagnose mitral valve prolapse. The images show the prolapse, any thickening of the valve leaflets, and any leakage of blood through the prolapsed valve.

■ WHAT IS THE TREATMENT?

Most people with mitral valve prolapse don’t need treatment. For some patients, the heart rhythm abnormalities with mitral valve prolapse sometimes become uncomfortable. Drugs such as beta-blockers may be helpful to treat the symptoms.

■ HOW DOES IT OCCUR?

With mitral valve prolapse, one or both of the leaflets bulge (prolapse) into the left atrium of the heart. Often it is not known why or how this occurs. It occurs in adults with otherwise normal hearts. It also occurs in people with rare, inherited diseases of connective tissue, such as Marfan syndrome.

■ HOW CAN I TAKE CARE OF MYSELF?

- Check with your doctor if your symptoms worsen.

- If you have high blood pressure, make sure you follow your doctor's treatment plan for it.
- If you have significant mitral regurgitation, you should probably avoid heavy exercise.

■ HOW LONG WILL I HAVE THIS CONDITION?

Mitral valve prolapse does not go away. You may never have symptoms, you can have symptoms that come and go, or you may continue to have ongoing symptoms. Most of the abnormal heart rhythms are not harmful.

Rarely, the leakage is severe enough to cause more serious heart problems. This leakage is called mitral regurgitation. It may get worse with time. The leakage may become bad enough to require heart valve surgery, but this is unusual.