

# Infective endocarditis

*... what you can do to avoid it*

Information for parents of young  
people with congenital heart disease



## What is Endocarditis

Endocarditis is a rare infection of the inner lining of the heart. It most commonly affects one or more of the heart valves, but may also occur around holes between the heart chambers, at the site of abnormalities in the walls of arteries or at the site of previous heart or arterial surgery.

It is a serious condition and can cause major damage to the heart valves and may even cause stroke or death.

Most endocarditis occurs in patients already known to have heart abnormalities.

Most patients with congenital heart disease are at increased risk of getting endocarditis. The only exceptions being isolated atrial septal defects or patients who have had completely curative treatment.

## Reducing the risk of getting endocarditis

Endocarditis can only occur if bacteria get into the bloodstream (called bacteraemia). Although it is not possible to prevent all bacteria getting into the bloodstream, there are some things you can do to reduce the risk of getting endocarditis.

Everybody carries bacteria in the mouth. These are usually harmless, but if the teeth or gums become diseased it becomes much easier for large numbers of bacteria to get into the blood, with the risk they may settle in the heart and cause endocarditis.

- Good oral health is therefore particularly important to reduce risk of endocarditis.
- Regular tooth brushing, with parents brushing their children's teeth until the age of seven, a healthy diet and check-ups at the dentist are essential to minimise the risk of endocarditis.

The dental team at your dental surgery will give you advice on how to look after your child's teeth and gums.

If your child has toothache/infection in their mouth, dental care should be sought as soon as possible.

### **If you have difficulties finding a dentist**

- Visit the NHS website which keeps a directory of local services [www.nhs.uk/servicedirectorries](http://www.nhs.uk/servicedirectorries)
- Call **NHS 111** who can provide advice and/or provide access to emergency dental services.

### **Other things that risk endocarditis**

Ear piercing, other body piercings or tattooing can lead to infections that may cause endocarditis.

**Patients at increased risk of endocarditis are safest avoiding these procedures.**

### **Recognising endocarditis**

Patients with endocarditis develop a temperature and feel generally unwell, with symptoms very similar to having the flu.

Flu is very common and usually resolves after about a week.

Flu-like symptoms with a temperature which persists for longer than a week should be reported to your cardiologist, not just to your GP, so that specialist tests can be carried out to check for endocarditis.

## Prevention and treatment of endocarditis

For many years patients were advised to have antibiotic cover for dental treatment. This advice has changed and antibiotics are no longer recommended.

Maintenance of good oral health is now considered to be the most effective way of reducing the risk of mouth bacteria causing infective endocarditis.

Similarly, antibiotic cover is no longer recommended routinely for procedures involving the airways, the gastrointestinal system or the urogenital system.

You can read about the 2008 NICE recommendations in detail at <http://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/>

### If you have any questions or concerns please speak to the Children's Cardiac Nurse Specialists

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