

Serious heart problem a family matter

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(HealthDay)—A potentially deadly heart problem can run in families and occur at similar ages, a new study suggests.

An aortic dissection is a sudden tear in one of the body's main arteries. "Family history is very important and is one factor in our 'guilt by association paradigm' for identifying [patients](#) at risk," said study co-author Dr. John Elefteriades, of the Aortic Institute at Yale-New Haven Hospital in Connecticut.

Researchers reviewed the [family](#) histories of 90 people treated for an aortic dissection. Among those cases, more than half of those within the same families occurred within a 10-year [age](#) span. The risk increased within certain age groups, the researchers found.

For instance, when they looked at patients whose aortic dissection occurred between ages 30 and 49, they found that 71 percent of other family members' dissections occurred in that age range. Among patients whose aortic dissection occurred between 60 and 79, they found 80 percent of other family members' dissections occurred after age 50.

The results were published online Aug. 25 in the *Annals of Thoracic Surgery*.

"If a family member suffered an [aortic aneurysm](#) or aortic dissection, chances are at least 1 in 8 that you may experience something similar in the future," Elefteriades said in a journal news release.

These findings allow "us to better appreciate the playbook of aortic dissection. Knowing how dissection operates—in this case, at what age dissections are likely to occur in a specific family—permits us to combat it more effectively and save many lives," Elefteriades said.

In many cases, aortic dissection occurs in people with an aortic aneurysm, a balloon-like bulge in the aorta. Each year, a ruptured or dissecting thoracic aortic aneurysm is the primary or contributing cause in more than 15,000 deaths in the United States, according to the U.S.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

However, up to 90 percent of patients with an aortic dissection in the first part of the aorta (ascending aorta) can be saved with emergency surgery. But as many as 40 percent of patients with aortic dissections die instantly, and risk of the death increases 1 percent with every hour that diagnosis and surgical repair are delayed, according to background notes with the study.

"If patients are approaching the age at which one of their [family members](#) suffered an [aortic dissection](#), they need to be very vigilant," Elefteriades said. "If patients have aneurysms in their family, get checked. If they have premature sudden death in their family, get checked. If they themselves have an aneurysm, comply with regular follow-up visits."

With many [thoracic aortic aneurysms](#), a full, normal life expectancy can be restored after protective aortic surgery, Elefteriades added.

More information: The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has more on [aortic aneurysm and dissection](#).

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