Dilated Cardiomyopathy (DCM)

Inherited Heart Disease Clinic
What is DCM?
The heart is a hollow organ that is mostly made up of muscle. It is divided into 4 chambers: the atria (2 chambers in the top of the heart) and the ventricles (2 chambers in the bottom). Normally, blood is gathered from the body in the atria, sent into the ventricles and then pumped back out into the body by a powerful contraction of the heart muscle.

In dilated cardiomyopathy (DCM), the heart muscle has become weak, thin or floppy. It cannot push the blood back to the body as forcefully as it once did. When the heart muscle becomes weak and stretched, too much blood can gather in the chambers. This may cause a backup of fluid in parts of the body and cause symptoms of DCM (see Symptoms below).

What causes DCM?
There are many different causes of DCM. About 20-40% of DCM is thought to be hereditary (genes passed from one generation to the next).

If members of your family are affected with this disease, you will have a 50% chance of inheriting the genetic defect. If DCM is in your family, your doctor may recommend genetic counselling for you and your family.
Other causes include: a virus (although rare, some viruses can be severe enough to weaken the heart muscle), autoimmune disease (the body’s own immune system attacks itself), excessive (too much) alcohol intake, pregnancy (although uncommon, the extra demands on the mother’s heart can cause DCM) and idiopathic (causes that may not be found).

**Symptoms:** The severity and type of symptoms will vary from person to person. You may have all or none of these symptoms. It is important to talk about any symptoms with your doctor.

**Some common symptoms may be:**

**Shortness of breath:** This can happen if your lungs become filled with fluid because of the heart muscle’s poor pumping ability.

**Ankle swelling:** Fluid can gather in your ankles or stomach area (belly) because of the heart muscle’s poor pumping ability.

**Tiredness:** A weak heart muscle is not able to supply the rest of your body with enough blood and oxygen. This can make you feel tired.

**Palpitations:** You may feel your heart racing or have a feeling of a ‘butterfly’ fluttering in your chest. You may also feel lightheaded or faint from a lack of blood supply to your brain.
Diagnosis
Genetic testing may be available. Your doctor will talk about this with you. There is no one test to diagnose DCM, but rather a number of tests to make sure that an accurate diagnosis is made. Your doctor may arrange for you to have some of these tests:

**Electrocardiogram (ECG):** An ECG is an electrical tracing of your heartbeat.

**Holter Monitor:** The monitor continuously records your heart’s rhythm for about 24 hours.

**Echocardiogram (ECHO):** Ultrasound pictures of your heart show the thickness of the heart muscle and how well it is pumping.

**MRI:** An MRI gives a clearer, more detailed picture of the layers of heart muscle than an ECHO.

Other tests may also be needed or suggested by your cardiologist (heart doctor). Your cardiologist will talk about this with you.
Treatment
Although there is no cure for DCM, some treatments may help you feel better. The treatment you receive will depend on how you are feeling and the overall functioning of your heart. Your doctor will review all of your test reports and together you will decide which treatment may work best.

*Treatments include:* medications, a pacemaker (for slow heart rates), an internal defibrillator (ICD - to detect and treat dangerous heart rhythms) and heart transplantation (rare).

What are your questions?
Please ask. We are here to help you.
More information:
› www.cardiomyopathy.org
› www.sads.ca
› www.heartsinrhythm.ca

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The information in this pamphlet is to be updated every 3 years or as needed.