

## Supporting a student with a heart condition

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### What is a heart condition

About one in every 100 children has a heart condition. Most children with a heart condition have been born with it (congenital heart condition). Heart conditions can usually be treated with medicine, procedures or surgery. About half of these cases require some surgery to correct the problem, some may correct themselves, while some are minor and do not require treatment. In some cases treatment does not correct the condition but maintains the child's health to a functional level.

There are several types of heart conditions. Some are structural in nature; some relate to oxygen levels in the heart or involve difficulties with the system of electrical pathways that control the heart rate; others may be due to an acquired heart condition resulting from illness or viral infection such as a cardiomyopathy. Many children with heart conditions can live a normal and full life.

For further information see:

[www.rch.org.au/cardiology](http://www.rch.org.au/cardiology)

[www.rch.org.au/cardiac\\_surg](http://www.rch.org.au/cardiac_surg)

[www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/factsheets.cfm?doc\\_id=7619](http://www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/factsheets.cfm?doc_id=7619)

[www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au)

McDonald, C 2004, *The Royal Children's Hospital Cardiac Handbook* (available through Care Managers Ward 7 West, Royal Children's Hospital).

### Support mechanisms

Schools are encouraged to explore support mechanisms available to students who have a heart condition. There is a range of resources and community groups available to assist schools. Please contact the Royal Children's Hospital (RCH) Education Institute or the Royal Children's Hospital (RCH) Cardiac Unit for information, or see the links below.

General information:

[www.heartkids.org.au](http://www.heartkids.org.au)

[www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au)

First aid action plan:

[www.heartkids.org.au/pdf/FirstAidAction.pdf](http://www.heartkids.org.au/pdf/FirstAidAction.pdf)

Medical history form:

[www.heartkids.org.au/pdf/MedHistoryForm.pdf](http://www.heartkids.org.au/pdf/MedHistoryForm.pdf)

Chronic illness and school:

[www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/factsheets.cfm?doc\\_id=11026](http://www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/factsheets.cfm?doc_id=11026)

[www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/factsheets.cfm?doc\\_id=11027](http://www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/factsheets.cfm?doc_id=11027)

## Strategies for schools supporting students with a heart condition

The implementation of the whole-school and classroom strategies listed below will assist and support students with a heart condition. While the strategies provided aim to build the capacity of schools in supporting students with a heart condition, we also acknowledge that individual needs may vary depending on the severity of the condition.

### Whole-school approach

- The school, health professionals, family and student should work in collaboration to best support the student at school.
- Ongoing communication with all parties is vital as changes and times of transition occur.
- Although the student may have a serious illness, he/she is a regular child. Help the student to maintain a normal school life as far as possible.
- Before the beginning of each year and at times of transition such as entering Year 7, schedule a meeting with all relevant staff, the school nurse, welfare coordinator, student and family to explain the student's condition and treatment.
- Provide information and education about a heart condition to staff and students in consultation with the student/family.
- Establish a key contact person with whom the family and student can liaise with regard to health and school issues.
- The student may tire more quickly than other children or become breathless, and will need to rest when they feel like it. Some need to avoid vigorous exercise. Be guided by parent/guardian information and the student.
- The student may need to take medication during the day. Ensure that the school nurse and all staff are fully informed and familiar with the exact medication procedures provided by the parent/guardian.
- Medication may cause the student to bruise or bleed more easily. The student may need adjustment to their sport curriculum where this is a concern.
- Medication may be diuretic causing the need to go to the toilet more frequently. The student may also need to eat or drink more frequently and may be more sensitive to temperature extremes than other children.
- Students with a congenital heart condition, or whose heart has been damaged by an acquired condition, or who have had heart surgery are at risk of

endocarditis. This is an infection in the lining of the heart caused by bacteria entering the blood stream, usually via the mouth. Prevention is therefore extremely important. All injuries that cause bleeding should be reported to parents/guardians. If treatment by a doctor or dentist is required, they must be informed that the student has a heart condition and that antibiotics will be needed.

- Students with heart disease are more likely to get chest infections. Exposure to some illnesses and infectious diseases may be dangerous, so inform parents/guardians when other students are sick.
- Some children with heart conditions are small and have difficulty gaining weight. In particular this may be of concern to adolescents where social issues arise out of feeling and looking different or not being able to participate in all activities. The school may need to access counselling services.
- Have parents/guardians specifically clarify the heart condition, its severity and its management. Paediatric heart disease represents a wide range of heart disorders, ranging from very mild to disabling effects. Clarification of the specifics provides critical understanding for the school.
- Emergencies are rare, but in this event it is critical to respond with the emergency plan and contact details provided by the family. When in doubt, always call for a MICA ambulance.
- School staff should have first aid training.
- Call for medical attention for the following symptoms:
  - Increased lethargy/irritability
  - Change in colour
  - Poor feeding
  - Vomiting or diarrhoea
  - Fast breathing or increased work of breathing
  - Reduced urine output
  - Temperature of more than 37.5 degrees centigrade
  - Redness, swelling, breakdown or discharge from surgical site
  - Dramatic weight loss
  - Dramatic weight gain or puffiness
  - Persistent cough.

### Classroom approach

- Most children with a heart condition attend regular schools and do not have any special learning needs as a result of their health status. Many will be able to fully participate in most aspects of school life. There is no reason why most students with heart conditions should not progress academically as well as their peers. However, at the same time, be alert for learning problems as some heart conditions do place students at greater risk of learning difficulties.
- Be aware that long stays away from school due to chronic illness may have an emotional and/or behavioural effect on some students. Be aware of anxiety issues. Utilise school counselling services if necessary.



- Sometimes long absences can cause a student to fall behind. Academic adjustment may be necessary, such as program modification or the employment of tutoring services. Modifications may include: seating the student near the front of the class, providing less written work, using visual tools to teach, allowing extra time to complete work, organising extra tuition, and allowing rest breaks.

## Contacts: RCH Education Institute and Cardiology Department RCH

*The RCH Education Institute and Cardiology Department RCH encourage schools to contact us should they require further information.*

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