Muscular Dystrophy and the Heart

Muscular dystrophies, such as Duchene’s or Becker’s, are hereditary disorders. They can affect the heart. The main heart problem in muscular dystrophy (MD) is called dilated cardiomyopathy. With this problem one or both ventricles (lower pumping chambers) of the heart are enlarged and do not contract as they should. Patients with MD can also have heart rhythm abnormalities.

Signs and Symptoms

- Fatigue.
- Weight loss.
- Trouble sleeping well.
- Shortness of breath.
- Less able to be active.
- Cough.
- Nausea and vomiting.
- Swelling in the legs or feet.

There are often no symptoms when the heart problems are starting. As a result, it is crucial to see the cardiologist as your doctor orders.

Testing

An EKG and/or echocardiogram may be done to look closely at the heart muscle and its function. A Holter monitor may also be worn to assess the heart rate and rhythm over a period of 24-48 hours.

A cardiac MRI may also be done to look more closely at the heart muscle and how it is working.

Treatment

Treatment for cardiomyopathy is the same as the treatment for heart failure. This includes the use of medicines. All of these help the heart muscle work better.

- **ACE Inhibitors** (ACE) (Enalapril) relax your arteries and veins. This reduces the work of the heart. Side effects can include cough, feeling dizzy, loss of taste, swelling, skin rash, and high potassium levels. A serious side effect is swelling in face, mouth, hands or feet, or trouble swallowing or breathing. Seek medical help right away if this occurs.
- **Angiotensin II receptor blockers** (ARB’s) (Losartan) are used to relax and open up your arteries. Side effects can include feeling dizzy, fatigue, and swelling.

- **Beta Blockers** (Propranolol, Atenolol, Carvedilol) block the effects of the chemicals in your body that can make your heart work too hard. Side effects can include shortness of breath, slow heartbeat, feeling tired or dizzy, and swelling. These drugs also help to control abnormal heart rhythms.

- **Digitalis** (Digoxin, Lanoxin) is used to improve the strength and efficiency of the heart. It controls the rate and rhythm of the heart beat. Side effects may include nausea and loss of hunger, blurred vision, feeling confused, irregular heartbeat, and headache.

- **Diuretics** (water pill) help your body get rid of excess fluid and salt. This makes it easier for your heart to pump. Side effects can include leg cramps, feeling dizzy, skin rash, dehydration, weakness, and low potassium levels.