



THE NATION

Babies Called Prone to Heart Ailment

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WASHINGTON - Babies under a year old are especially prone to developing a deadly heart condition called cardiomyopathy, and the condition, while rare, may occur more often than doctors believed, researchers said Wednesday.

They said pediatricians have been given the wrong advice for years -- that the heart condition was most likely to develop in late childhood.

But Dr. Steven Lipshultz of the University of Rochester said he and colleagues had found the opposite.

"A pediatrician who is concerned about a child potentially having a heart problem may consult some of today's most popular cardiology textbooks, and he or she will read that it is unusual for a young child to get cardiomyopathy," Lipshultz said in a statement.

"This study shows that children are about 10 times more likely to develop cardiomyopathy during their first year of life than ages 2 to 18 combined. This study shows that expert opinion from around the world is not a viable substitute for examining the data."

Cardiomyopathy can be caused by viruses, certain diseases, or by a birth defect. It is marked by damage to the ventricles, the lower chambers of the heart.

"Almost 40% of children with symptoms of cardiomyopathy ultimately die of the condition or require cardiac transplantation, and this percentage has remained unaltered by decades of medical research," Dr. Arnold Strauss of Vanderbilt University in Nashville and Dr. James Lock of Harvard Medical

School wrote in a commentary on the studies, published in the New England Journal of Medicine.

Lipshultz said symptoms are often vague, so a pediatrician who sees an infant who is unhappy, not feeding well and is breathing hard may not suspect cardiomyopathy.

"A child like this could die of cardiomyopathy," Lipshultz said. "If pediatricians don't know to look for cardiomyopathy, they won't find out the child has it."

Lipshultz's team and a separate group in Australia both found the incidence of cardiomyopathy may have been underestimated by as much as 45%. Both found that about 1 in every 100,000 children develops the condition.

His team also found the incidence of cardiomyopathy was higher among boys than girls, while black and Latino children were more prone to develop the conditions than whites.

"This leads us to believe that genetics may be an important reason children develop cardiomyopathy," he added. "The regional differences are important because that suggests there may be environmental factors at play in those regions."

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