UHealth Launches COVID-19 Heart Program

A new COVID-19 Heart Program developed by cardiologists with the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine is addressing the varied heart issues stemming from the pandemic with comprehensive screenings and evaluations in a safe clinical setting. It also incorporates the latest findings from UM cardiology researchers studying how the coronavirus can affect the heart and its surrounding tissues.

“Your heart health may have been affected in several ways,” said Jeffrey Goldberger, M.D., M.B.A., professor of medicine and chief of the Cardiovascular Division. “If you tested positive for COVID-19, you may be wondering if your heart has been damaged by the virus or the inflammation that occurred with the infection. If you did not have COVID-19, you might have experienced troubling symptoms, like chest pain, shortness of breath, palpitations, or loss of consciousness, but delayed seeking care due to COVID-19 concerns. You might also be concerned with your overall heart health, and would like an evaluation.”
Carlos E. Alfonso, M.D., associate professor of medicine and director of the cardiology fellowship training program at UM/Jackson Memorial Hospital, said the UM specialists have been conducting thorough heart evaluations for many years. “We have been very successful in identifying people with early signs of coronary artery disease who require further treatment and prevention to avoid progression of the disease and its deleterious consequences,” he said.

To address COVID-19 safety concerns, the University of Miami Health System is taking the necessary precautions for patients to receive care in a safe environment. Examination rooms are carefully disinfected, and doctors and nurses wear personal protective equipment such as goggles, gloves, and face masks. Non-COVID patients are kept in areas separate from COVID-19 patients, and anyone with a suspected case of coronavirus is treated in an isolated area. “You can feel secure in scheduling a heart evaluation at our cardiology clinics,” Dr. Alfonso said.

**COVID-19 Positive Patients**

The COVID-19 Heart Program is designed to address three types of individual concerns, beginning with patients who have tested positive and have recovered from the coronavirus infection.
“Our clinical studies indicate that approximately one-third of patients who have been hospitalized for COVID-19 infection show evidence of inflammation of the heart,” said Dr. Goldberger. “How the heart heals from this inflammation is currently unknown, but we do know how to address certain findings to prevent long-term complications. Whether people with less severe cases of COVID-19 infection that did not require hospitalization could also have had inflammation of the heart is unknown.”

Reports from the American College of Cardiology (ACC) indicate that cardiovascular disease and hypertension are significant risk factors for COVID-19 patients. The UM cardiology specialists are now screening individuals with COVID-19 for signs of immediate or potential future damage to the heart.

“We know that many viral infections leave their mark on the heart,” said Dr. Goldberger. For instance, inflammation of the fatty epicardial tissues surrounding the heart is associated with coronary artery disease and atrial fibrillation. “You might not realize this damage has occurred,” he added.

People who test positive for COVID-19 and have other chronic health issues, such as hypertension, diabetes, or cancer, may be at particularly high risk for heart damage, according to Dr. Goldberger. “We have many types of medications to treat inflammation and other types of heart disease. But it’s very important to identify these issues at an early stage so our specialists can provide preventive care and reduce the risk of a dangerous problem.”

Untreated Heart Disease during COVID-19
During the COVID-19 pandemic, cardiologists across the country have seen an estimated 40 percent reduction in the number of heart attacks treated in hospitals. The same trend has occurred with other cardiac conditions, such as atrial fibrillation and syncope (loss of consciousness) that are typically treated in the hospital.

“Many people with serious symptoms have stayed home rather than go to the emergency room,” said Dr. Goldberger. “While we can’t go back in time to treat a dangerous heart condition, we can provide effective ongoing care to address the underlying heart problems that were not addressed during the COVID-19 pandemic.”

If you had prolonged periods of chest pain or pressure, jaw pain, shortness of breath, lightheadedness, palpitations, or fainting while at home, the UM heart specialists can conduct a comprehensive evaluation to figure out what happened, and initiate necessary treatments to prevent future heart attacks or other heart problems.

**Heart Health Concerns**

For many people, the pandemic has led to an increased interest in their overall health. For individuals with concerns about their heart due to family history or risk factors such as diabetes, high blood pressure, smoking, obesity, and lack of exercise, now is as good a time as any to assess risk for heart disease and put a plan in place to lower the risk. Many questions have also been raised about the use of certain blood pressure medications and the risks of COVID-19 related to some of these conditions. “As the virus may linger with us for a while, now is also a good time to get all your questions and
concerns addressed,” said Dr. Goldberger.

The UM cardiologists can help individuals understand their risk for heart disease, added Dr. Alfonso. “For instance, we offer calcium scoring studies to determine the extent of atherosclerosis, the buildup of plaque on the coronary arteries that could lead to a heart attack. That’s one of the ways we can refine risk beyond just measuring cholesterol levels in the blood.”

A cardiology evaluation may also uncover evidence of a heart valve problem or an irregular heartbeat, Dr. Alfonso said. “We have a wide range of therapies to treat these conditions. If you are concerned about your heart, a thorough evaluation can provide answers to your questions.”

To learn more, visit the COVID-19 Heart Program site.

To make an appointment for the COVID-19 Heart Program, call 305-2-HEART-U (305-243-2788).