

HCM: An Underdiagnosed Heart Condition

Hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, or HCM, is a common genetic heart condition that affects an estimated 700,000 Americans. Yet only 10% to 20% of cases are identified in clinical practice. This gap leaves many patients undiagnosed until symptoms worsen or serious complications occur. Improving recognition of HCM is critical to ensuring timely care and better outcomes.



What is HCM?

HCM is a disease in which the heart muscles become abnormally thick. This can make it harder for the heart to pump blood and may disrupt normal heart rhythms. While some patients experience symptoms, others may live for years without noticeable signs. HCM is the leading identifiable cause of sudden cardiac death in otherwise healthy individuals under 35.



Why is HCM underdiagnosed?

HCM often goes unrecognized because many patients experience no symptoms for years or even decades, delaying routine evaluation and diagnosis. When symptoms do appear, they commonly include shortness of breath, chest pain and dizziness, which are often mistaken for other conditions. This overlap can delay referral to a specialist.



How do disparities impact diagnosis?

Disparities in diagnosis further contribute to underdiagnosis. Women are less likely to be diagnosed than men, even when experiencing symptoms, which can delay appropriate care. Black people are more likely to present with advanced disease, such as heart failure, yet are less often referred for specialized care or symptom management. In addition, limited access to cardiologists and specialized imaging continues to widen these gaps across all communities.



How can policymakers help close gaps?

Policymakers can support clinician education initiatives that increase awareness and recognition of the disease. Expanding access to genetic testing can help identify at-risk individuals and families earlier. Ensuring coverage for advanced imaging like cardiac MRIs and echocardiographs can improve diagnostic accuracy. In addition, reducing prior authorizations for treatments can help ensure patients receive timely and appropriate care.



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