Heart Transplant

What is a heart transplant?

A heart transplant is a surgical procedure to replace a patient's existing heart that has been damaged or diseased with a new heart from a deceased donor.

Who can benefit from having heart transplant surgery?

A diseased or damaged heart cannot pump enough blood around the body as needed. If the heart has become irreversibly damaged and other treatments will not improve blood flow, a heart transplant may be the best solution. Conditions that may result in a heart transplant include long-term heart failure, a history of heart attacks, congenital heart disease, coronary artery disease and irreversible injury to the heart.

Procedure

Heart transplant surgery is performed under a general anesthetic. An incision is made into the chest and you will be placed on a heart-lung machine that allows continued blood flow to the heart and lungs during the procedure. The heart is then removed, except for the back walls, and the new heart sewn into place. The blood vessels are then reconnected to resume blood flow, and the heart will begin to beat; sometimes an electric shock is necessary to get the heart started. The incision is closed and tubes are left in place to drain any excess fluid.

Recovery period

Patients will need to stay in hospital for up to two weeks following heart transplant surgery. The main concern is the body rejecting the new heart and you will be constantly monitored and undergo regular biopsies so your physician can identify any damage. Many patients can return to doing vigorous activities but your physician will determine how long you need to wait on returning to work and exercise, which will depend on the healing period. You will be kept on medication and taught how to administer these (there may be side-effects).

Risks

Complications surrounding heart transplant surgery include bleeding, infection and rejection of the new heart, which may mean a return to surgery, and mortality.