

When It's Surgery On Your Heart, Ask Lots of Questions First

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Information to assist patients in making informed choices, in consultation with their doctors.

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Over the years there have been many advances in treatment options for patients with heart problems. Drugs, advances in interventional options, and lifestyle changes may help to relieve symptoms but some patients still require open heart surgery. This is an invasive procedure with a small but significant mortality risk. To be sure that open heart surgery is appropriate; you should review ALL treatment alternatives with your doctor.

In choosing the best treatment option with your doctor, be sure to ask these important questions:

1. What are your options, both surgical and non-surgical?
2. What are the benefits versus the risks of the recommended treatment?
3. Is open heart surgery the best treatment for your particular condition?

If you decide on open heart surgery, QUALITY, not convenience, should be your major concern. Your choice of OHS program and surgeon is important because there may be significant quality and mortality differences among hospitals and surgeons.

The old adage, "Practice Makes Perfect", is often correct!

Medical researchers interested in reducing mortality and promoting quality outcomes have developed **minimum** volume recommendations for various surgical procedures, including open-heart surgery. Their work indicates that patients generally fare better when treated at hospitals that care for many patients with the same problem. As a result of these studies, in 1993 Michigan increased its annual minimum volume requirements. Adult programs that were approved after 1993 have had to perform **at least 300** surgeries by the third year of operation.

Published medical studies show that there are quality differences in open heart surgery programs! These studies show that open-heart surgery patients tend to have better survival rates at hospitals that perform more of these operations. **Even better is having a high volume surgeon at a high volume hospital.**

Low-volume programs (typically including new ones) often have lower survival rates, although some low-volume hospitals have good results, and some high-volume hospitals have poor results.

For example, a March 2000 article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* indicated that for high volumes (at least 500 cases annually): "Evidence exists that high-volume hospitals have lower mortality rates than low-volume hospitals" for coronary artery bypass graft surgeries (CABGs), which comprise most open heart surgeries, but not all. An April 2002 New England Journal of Medicine article also found a correlation between high volumes and lower mortality. This study defined "**high-volume**" **at even a higher threshold (550 CABGs).**

Ask these questions before selecting the hospital and surgeon:

1. How many procedures does the hospital and surgeon perform annually? How does that compare with other hospitals and surgeons?
2. What are the mortality and complication rates for the hospital and surgeon, allowing for severity of patients' conditions? How do they compare with other hospitals and surgeons?
3. Does the hospital have a full range of services for diagnosis and treatment of heart and related problems?
4. What is the surgical team's experience, including nurses and technicians; how often does the team work together?

5. Different insurance plans provide different levels of coverage. Ask your health plan representative for details.

Selecting a hospital and surgeon for OHS should be based on standardized, severity adjusted, publicly available, hospital and surgeon-specific comparative outcome data. However, until that information is available in Michigan, the “total number of open-heart surgeries” is an important indicator of greater safety and higher quality.

The data available for this brochure is only through calendar year 2006. Consumers should ask hospitals for their current data, especially if reports indicate that less than 300 open heart surgeries are performed annually.

Michigan has 12 adult open-heart programs (out of 31 adult programs) with 3-year averages above 500 cases annually. They are well distributed around the state.

This brochure includes features to assure improved data comparability: However it should be noted that a change in the OHS definition made by the Michigan Department of Community Health (MDCH increased OHS volumes from 2003 forward. This definitional change somewhat offset the overall decline in Michigan’s OHS procedures, that would have been even greater.

As in previous years, this brochure provides OHS volumes for ALL Michigan OHS programs. For this and the prior brochures, the brochure’s data have been modified in various ways to assure more valid comparisons. First, the volumes are shown by **calendar** years. Secondly, annual volumes are shown for the last three years, plus a **three-year average** to focus on trends.

Choose a high volume hospital and surgeon, unless you and your doctor are given strong evidence that another choice will assure you of a better quality outcome with lower risk.

Remember, It’s your Heart!



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