

UCLA Pediatric Heart Transplant/Heart Failure Program offers integrated care and medical innovations



UCLA is home to one of the largest pediatric heart-transplant programs in the country and is among the busiest regional referral centers for pediatric heart failure. Since 1984, more than 300 children have received heart transplants and nearly 2,000 heart-transplant patients have received care at UCLA.

Heart failure affects an estimated 12,000 to 35,000 children in the United States each year. Of these, approximately 250 will require transplantation.

UCLA pediatric cardiologists often offer treatments that aren't available in other centers. Our surgeons perform multi-organ pediatric transplants, including pediatric heart-kidney transplants, and were responsible for the only pediatric heart-liver transplant performed in Southern California. Yet despite the higher level of medical complexity of these patients, success rates at UCLA are among the best in the nation.

Comprehensive evaluation

Each child referred to the Pediatric Heart Transplant/Heart Failure Program undergoes a thorough evaluation that can include the expertise of a large number of specialists including pediatric cardiologists, pediatric cardiothoracic surgeons, nurse practitioners, transplant coordinators and social workers.

Unique emotional support for pediatric cardiology patients

"Heart disease can be scary," says Juan Alejos, MD, medical director of the Pediatric Heart Transplant/Heart Failure Program. "Having a child with cardiomyopathy can impact the entire family, and stress in vulnerable families can affect patient behavioral health and medical outcomes. Our well-being-centered approach means that we want your child to not only get better, but also to feel good along the way."

Parents can become so caught up in attending to the medical needs of a sick child that they often won't seek out support services that can help them deal more successfully with the illness and its effects on the entire family.

"By implementing family-centered screening and consultations during their routine clinic visits, we are making support more accessible for our distressed patients," says Kanchana Wijesekera, PhD, a clinical psychologist with the Pediatric Heart Transplant/Heart Failure Program. "We teach them how to cope with difficult emotions, set realistic goals, and use family-level problem solving to improve patient and family resilience."

Because children undergoing heart transplantation and treatment for heart failure are at high risk for developing diabetes, gum disease and depression, UCLA's team also includes nutritionists, dentists and child development specialists.

UCLA developed many of the clinical protocols used in pediatric heart programs around the country and offers its young patients, some only a few hours old, the latest innovations for the treatment of heart failure.

Circulatory support options

With only about 75 small donor hearts becoming available each year, UCLA's surgical/medical team offers a number of mechanical circulatory support options for those awaiting donor organs.

The Berlin Heart ventricular assist device (VAD) can act as a bridge to transplantation for up to one year, with a success rate of nearly 90 percent.

The UCLA program is one of just a handful nationwide with the expertise and resources to allow pediatric VAD patients the flexibility of home-monitoring.

In some cases, by allowing rest and recovery of the damaged heart, a VAD has been used to attempt to reverse cardiomyopathy in pediatric patients and enable them to avoid transplantation.

Extracorporeal membrane oxygenation (ECMO) offers bypass heart and/or lung support for up to two weeks in an acute setting when these organs have failed completely.

Mattel Children's Hospital UCLA has been recognized as an ECMO Center of Excellence by the Extracorporeal Life Support Organization.

Cutting-edge science

Advanced surgical and catheter-based procedures as well as pacemaker therapies help many children and can delay or eliminate the need for a heart transplant.

- ABO-incompatible heart transplant (ABOi) is a procedure that capitalizes on the fact that infants do not have a well-developed immune system, allowing children under 12 months to receive a heart from a non-matching donor. Survival rates for ABOi patients have been shown to be the same as for those who receive a compatible heart.
- UCLA pediatric cardiology specialists are leaders in the development of low-risk, minimally invasive transcatheter techniques that can replace open procedures. Heart repairs include expanding narrowed passages and closing holes. UCLA performs nearly 600 pediatric catheterizations per year.
- Cardiac resynchronization therapy (CRT) utilizes a specialized pacemaker to make the heart walls pump blood in a more efficient and coordinated way.
- Pulmonary artery banding (PAB) is a palliative procedure that can improve ventricular function in the heart of an infant or young child when surgical repair is not feasible. UCLA is one of a very few centers nationwide to offer PAB.

Participating Team Members

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