

5 CRITICAL QUESTIONS ANSWERED

FOR HEART VALVE SURGERY PATIENTS



Adam Pick

Patient & Website Founder
HeartValveSurgery.com
(888) 725-4311



HeartValveSurgery.com
www.heartvalvesurgery.com

About the Former Patient & Author



For his work as a patient advocate and a high technology consultant, Adam Pick has been featured on *CNN*, *Medical News Today*, *Health Readings*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *BusinessWeek* and *The Wall Street Journal*. A native and current resident of Los Angeles, Adam earned a bachelors and a graduate degree from the University of Michigan.

On November 3, 2005, Adam learned that he had severe valve disease and an enlarged heart. To treat his valvular defect, Adam needed double heart valve surgery. Eight weeks later, [Dr. Vaughn Starnes](#) performed aortic and pulmonary valve surgery on Adam at USC Medical Center.

As part of his experience, Adam learned the highs, the lows, the challenges, the opportunities and the frustrations of heart valve surgery. His book, *The Patient's Guide To Heart Valve Surgery*, is Adam's personal attempt to support patients and caregivers through the entire heart valve surgery process - from diagnosis through recovery.

In addition to his book, Adam launched www.HeartValveSurgery.com. Since 2006, this website has helped over 7 million patients and caregivers through heart valve surgery. Today, the website features a [surgeon finder](#), [a heart hospitals directory](#), [Adam's blog](#), a book, educational videos, and a [patient community](#) with thousands of patients and over 10,000 pages of information. In addition, [Adam's Facebook Page](#) about heart valve disease now has over 330,000 members.

Recently, Adam transformed this project into a charitable effort. To help children born with congenital heart defects, Adam donates a portion of proceeds to Gift of Life International, a non-profit organization, dedicated to providing medical treatment to kids suffering from cardiac disorders. [Learn more here.](#)



"Adam's story is extraordinary... With his website, Adam filled an important gap for heart surgery patients. In addition to trusted information, Adam provides compassion, reassurance and connections among patients. This is a huge contribution to the welfare of patients everywhere."

--Dr. Marc Gillinov, Chairman of Cardiac Surgery, Cleveland Clinic

Some Opening Words...

As a former patient, I can imagine what you may be going through right now. I can imagine that you may be confused. I can imagine that you may be nervous. I can imagine that you may be experiencing a unique type of fear that you have never felt before.

I can imagine that several questions are racing through your mind. Some of the questions I remember are:

- Why me?
- Do I really need to have heart valve surgery?
- Will I ever be the same again?
- How painful will the operation be?
- And the big question... Could I die?

While I could continue this list of questions -- for the next several pages -- I am not going to. Instead, I would like to use this excerpt -- from [The Patient's Guide To Heart Valve Surgery](#) -- to share **5 Critical Questions** that patients, their families and friends typically experience before and after heart valve surgery.

So you know... I personally identified these questions after interacting with thousands of patients, caregivers, surgeons, cardiologists and nurses since launching my website 10 years ago.

My goal with this free report is to help you better prepare for your upcoming surgery.

Keep on tickin!

ADAM



Critical Question #1

Is Heart Valve Surgery Safe?

I will never forget that first-and-only meeting with my cardiologist, Dr. Bad Bedside Manner.

After a ten-second review of my echocardiogram, the stoic doctor said smugly, “Huh! Why weren’t you here last year? Or, two years ago for that matter? You need a new heart valve! And, you need it soon!”

The doctor then continued to tell me that my heart was already dilated (enlarged) and suffering from ‘working overtime’ as he phrased it.

I was numb in that moment. That ‘numbness’ would later turn into a tear-filled conversation with Robyn, my wife. We were both scared that my life... our life... would be negatively impacted by two, valvular disorders -- stenosis and regurgitation.

We were scared. We felt alone. And, we were very unclear about the facts about heart valve surgery.



So you know, my research suggests that these feelings – fear, confusion, uncertainty --are very common among patients. Following a severe heart valve diagnosis, patients often isolate themselves as the possibility of heart surgery may cast an ominous cloud over their future.

Stop The Fear, Uncertainty & Loneliness... Focus On The Facts!

Yes. There is good news to share. Patients do not need to succumb to these dark feelings once they understand the realities of heart valve surgery.

For me, the more I researched heart valve surgery, the more I was encouraged that I would be just fine after surgery.



To help patients dispel their fear of heart valve surgery, I often provide them with these facts:

- Each year, over 250,000 heart valve surgery operations are performed around the world. The key points of this statistic are (i) you are not alone and (ii) you are not the first person to have this procedure performed.
- Medical technology is on your side! This is a transformational time for valvular treatment as new technologies are enhancing patient comfort with less invasive techniques – including mini-sternotomy, mini-thoracotomy, robotics and catheter-based devices.
- In a recent survey, 72 percent of patients surveyed suggested that heart valve surgery generated a “positive impact” in their lives!
- To help you connect with other patients and minimize feelings of loneliness, please visit the [‘Patient Community’](#) section at HeartValveSurgery.com. There, you will find our [Patient](#)

[Community](#), a social network of patients and caregivers designed to enhance patient communication and patient interaction.

- Lastly... The mortality rate of heart valve surgery is only 1.5 percent, according to *The Society of Thoracic Surgeons*, a leading association of over 5,000 cardiac surgeons. At some clinics, including the Cleveland Clinic, the mortality rate is below 1.5% for certain procedures. As you can read at [this link](#), Northwestern Medicine just reported 0% mortality during its last 500 mitral valve repair surgeries for asymptomatic patients with a leaking heart valve.

It is true and tragic that a small percentage of patients do not make it through the surgery. But, when you think about it, life is risk. From the moment you wake up in the morning, you are in a risky situation.

Consider the act of driving... I don't know about you, but I live in Los Angeles. The drivers here are crazy! At least once a week I yell out to someone, "What are you doing? Are you trying to kill me?"



**Remember... You are not alone.
Remember... The odds of
having a successful surgery are
significantly in your favor.**

Critical Question #2

Do I Need To Research My Surgical Options? The Surgeon? The Hospital?

When Dr. Bad Bedside Manner diagnosed my valve disorder, I only understood about 10% of the medical terms he used during that conversation.

It felt like the cardiologist was speaking the foreign language of Urdu. I had no idea what stenosis, regurgitation, dilation or calcification meant.

To resolve my confusion, I began researching the anatomy of my heart and my heart valves. I really wanted to understand what was wrong. Plus, I wanted to know how surgery was going to make it right.



Over the years, I have learned that many patients are different than me. Some patients don't

want to learn about their heart valve disease. Some patients don't want to learn about their surgical options. Some patients don't want to learn about their surgeons or their hospitals. Some patients, surprisingly, don't want to learn about anything.

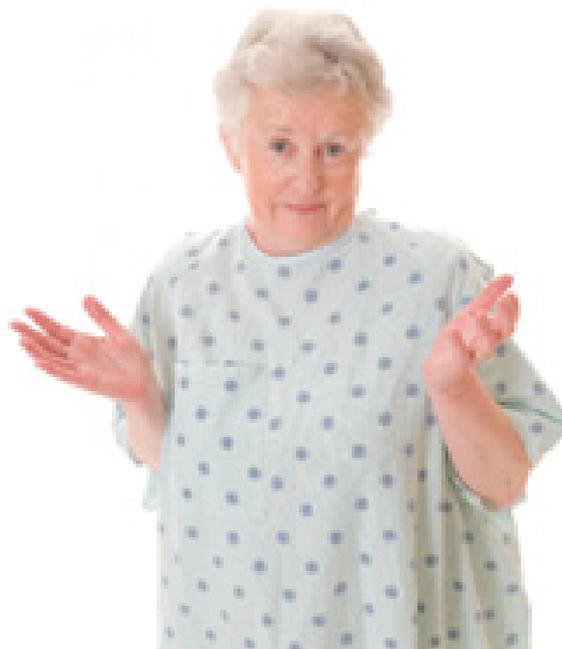
Be Mindful Of The “Medical System”

Instead of doing their homework, some patients let the “Medical System” take over. Unfortunately, the medical system can dictate a direct path to surgical intervention without any thoughtful patient consideration.

Needless to say, it's a pretty big and intimidating system. But, it is critical that the patient or their caregiver take the time to learn about their condition and ensure that the proper steps are taken to guarantee the best quality of life after surgery.

Barbara's Story

Here's a real-life example of a patient who did not do her homework and got caught up in the medical system.



At 68 years of age, Barbara, from South Dakota, was diagnosed with severe aortic stenosis. One night, Barbara called me. She was scared out of her mind.

Barbara was told by her local cardiologist and surgeon that she needed an aortic valve replacement using a mechanical valve replacement (also known as a prosthesis). Unfortunately, this option would require Barbara to be on blood thinners for the rest of her life.

Although I'm not a doctor, this sounded like a terrible surgical approach. Given her age, health, and risk factors, I suggested that Barbara research her options and consider speaking with another medical team.

Long story short... Barbara read [my book](#) to learn more about heart valve surgery. Then, Barbara changed surgeons. Barbara changed hospitals. And, Barbara decided against a mechanical heart valve replacement. Instead, she selected a pericardial tissue valve that does not require any post-operative, drug therapy.



Please take the time to do your homework – learn about your heart, learn about your surgical options, learn about your doctor, and learn about your hospital.

Critical Question #3

Should I Get A Second Opinion?

After my primary diagnosis from Dr. Bad Bedside Manner, I wasted no time getting a second opinion for two reasons. First, I didn't like the guy. Second, I wanted to be 100% confident in the diagnosis.

After the second opinion by Dr. Michael Chaikan, there was consensus -- from both cardiologists -- that I needed surgery in a very short time frame. My heart was dilated and I suffered from stenosis and regurgitation.

During the past six years, I have learned that this "Second Everything" approach is not followed by many patients. In fact, I recently conducted a survey of many heart valve surgery patients that addressed this topic.

In the survey, I asked patients, "Did you get a second opinion to confirm your heart valve defect or disease?"

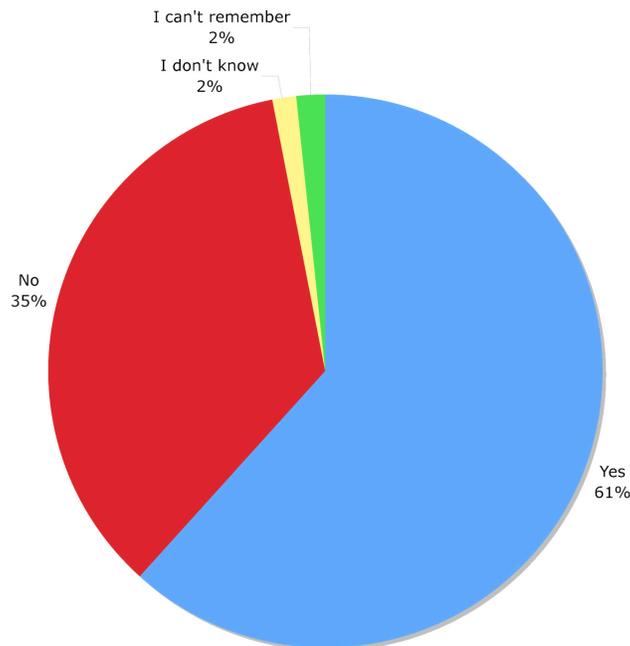
I was alarmed when I learned the results.

While the majority of patients responded "Yes" to that question, 35 percent of patients said, "No". For me, this was an important finding that highlighted a significant and potentially devastating scenario for patients.

"Why is Adam so sensitive about second opinions?" you might be wondering.

So you know, I have spoke with many patients who DID NOT NEED surgery AFTER having a second opinion.

Did You Get A Second Opinion To Confirm Your Valve Disease Or Detect? (Source: www.HeartValveSurgery.com)



Consider what Mike, 47, wrote to me, “Adam - Lucky for me, my girlfriend’s cousin is a doctor at a well noted cardiac hospital. During my second opinion, I was so surprised at how much time these doctors spent with me compared to the doctors at my other hospital. **After these doctors put me through their tests, they came to the conclusion that I do not need the surgery at this time.** I feel much more confident with the care I receive at my “new” hospital. I was shocked to read in your book that 35% of patients did not get a second opinion.”

Mike is not alone. I have heard similar stories from Sara, Ben, Taylor and many others.



Please consider getting a second opinion prior to heart valve surgery. You want to be 100% confident that surgery is required when you are being rolled into the operating room.

Critical Question #4

What Should I Ask My Surgeons When We Meet?

When a second opinion confirms that you need surgery, it's time to meet with your potential surgeons.

While I investigated several surgeons across the country, two local names continued to appear in my research. Personally, I wanted to meet with each surgeon to learn more about them. I also wanted to hear their thoughts about (i) my situation, (ii) the surgical options available to me, and (iii) their surgical outcomes.



Before my interviews, I prepared a list of questions to review with each doctor.

Interestingly... The more I talked with other patients about their surgeon interviews, the more I learned they were NOT prepared for those meetings. Patients shared with me that they felt “intimidated”, “not smart enough”, and “unable to discuss treatment options” with their surgeons.

For this reason, I created a list of questions to help patients learn about their surgeons, their surgical options and surgical outcomes. This list consists of open-ended questions. I want the doctors to explain their thoughts rather than answer with a simple 'yes' or 'no' response.

Here are some of the questions from my list:

- Why do you think I need surgery?
- What type of surgery do you recommend? Why?
- Has anyone ever died from that type of surgery? Why?
- Are there any other less invasive opportunities to consider? What are they?
- How long have you been performing heart valve surgery for?
- How many surgeries have you performed?
- What do you consider my greatest risks from this operation? Why?
- What do you expect as the best result from this operation? Why?
- Do you think I will need another operation in the future? Why?
- What else should I know about you or this surgery that might help me make up my mind?



“Don’t be afraid to ask questions. No question is unimportant as long as it helps you get ready for things to come. Read as much as you can to become as familiar with your procedures and options. The better prepared you are... The better your experience will be.”

-- Dewayne Epley, Patient

You Want An Experienced Surgeon... So, Ask For Their Outcomes!

It is also very important that you ask your surgeon about their surgical results for all cardiac procedures -- including the heart valve operation you require.

Today, more than ever, there is a push for cardiac surgeons to publish their surgical outcomes. Several leading cardiac care centers and surgeons believe this is an appropriate and responsible action.

[Dr. Vincent Gaudiani](#), a leading heart valve specialist who has performed over 6,000 heart valve procedures, recently shared with me:



“Cardiac surgery, more than any other specialty, is about outcomes. Patients should be able to find out what their surgeon’s outcomes are over a long period of time... Not just the last three cases.”

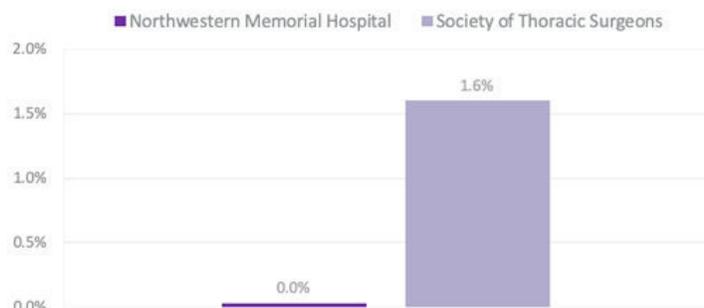
--Dr. Vincent Gaudiani,
Pacific Coast Cardiac & Vascular Surgeons

To support Dr. Gaudiani’s emphasis on outcomes, many cardiac centers now make their surgical outcomes available to patients. All you need to do is ask or do some research. For example, in the [Heart Hospitals Directory](#) at HeartValveSurgery.com, you can see surgical outcomes for several cardiac centers including [Northwestern Medicine](#).

For example, here is an example from Northwestern’s recent surgical outcomes report which shows 0% mortality for surgical aortic valve replacement (SAVR) procedures.

Example of Surgical Outcomes Report For Heart Valve Surgery (2020 Northwestern Medicine Surgical Outcomes Report)

0% Risk-adjusted* In-hospital Mortality Rate for Open Isolated Aortic Valve Replacement Surgeries**
Calendar Year 2019



Source: Society of Thoracic Surgeons Registry

*Risk adjustment allows for a more accurate comparison by accounting for individual patient factors present prior to hospitalization such as age, severity of illness and other medical problems that can put certain patients at greater risk of complications or death than others.

**In this case lower is better.

Critical Question #5

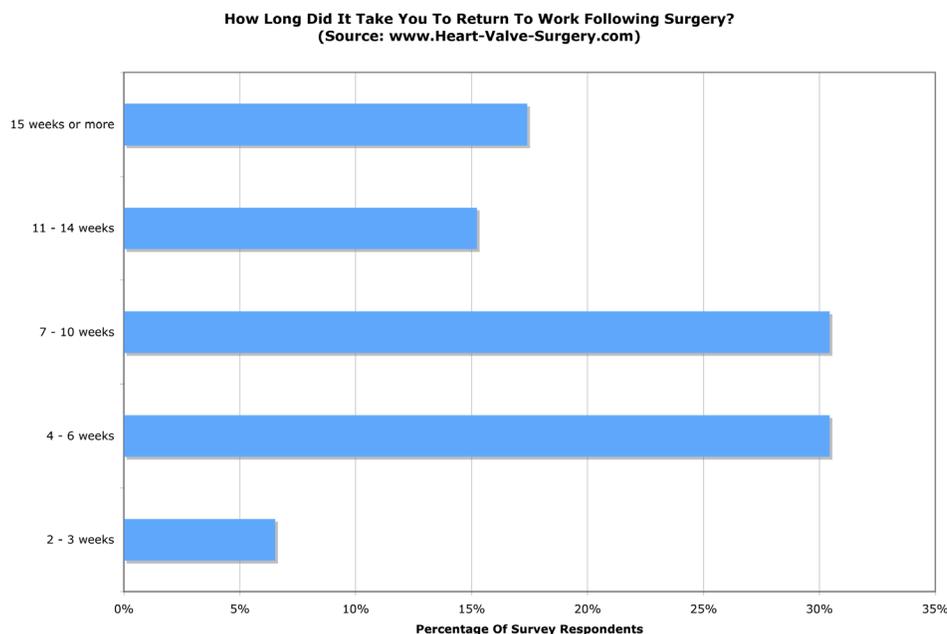
How Should I Prepare For The Recovery From Heart Valve Surgery?

If there is one thing I have learned over the years -- after speaking with thousands of patients -- it is that patients often overlook the realities of the recovery.

Often times, medical teams suggest to the patient, “You’ll be recovered in about eight weeks.”

As my research indicates, this is simply not the case. While it is true, that some patients have eventless recoveries, without complications or pain, many patients have a unique recovery path -- as our bodies heal at different rates.

To better understand this, I surveyed over 100 patients about their recovery. As shown in the chart below, you can see that patient recovery times vary. Consider these patient comments from a post in my blog titled about the recovery from heart surgery.



- Shelby said, “I was fully recovered about six months after surgery. The first three months showed the greatest improvement... The next three months, I experienced a more gradual return to normality.”
- Kathy said, “At 16 months post-op, I am just beginning to really feel like myself. I had some complications with my aortic valve replacement.”
- Todd said, “I am 43 and had my mitral valve replaced on April 4, 2009. Now it’s June 2 and I feel about 80-85%.”
- Tom said, “I am now 6 months from mitral valve repair and single bypass. I feel like I am at 90%. The problem has been the healing of my split sternum. I am, however, playing golf again and walking 18 holes. I am 75 years old.”



“Don’t gauge your surgery and recovery on others. Each surgery is unique and each patient will handle things in a different manner. It seems that patients strive to become normal as fast as they can. What is normal? We will forever be heart surgery patients.”

-- Kathy Benson, Patient

Establishing A Recovery Plan BEFORE Surgery

While it is my hope that your recovery is quick, there are several potential issues that should be acknowledged and addressed prior to surgery. Again, I want you and your support group to be fully prepared.

Some elements of your recovery plan should include:

- Managing your homecoming from the hospital
- The ongoing use of your incentive spirometer
- Appropriate pain medication consumption
- The signs of cardiac depression
- Monitoring recovery milestones
- Attending cardiac rehabilitation



Please take the time BEFORE your heart valve procedure to clearly understand the benefits of a thoughtful, well-planned recovery.

More Help Is Just A Few Clicks Away!

Dear Patient or Caregiver,

I am hopeful this information helped you learn more about heart valve surgery from the patient perspective.

Thank you for providing me the opportunity to share these findings with you. If you are interested in learning more about heart valve surgery, patient tips, recommended surgeons, hospitals and more, I encourage you to read my book, [The Patient's Guide To Heart Valve Surgery](#), or use the educational tools referenced on the next page.

Lastly... Although we may not know each other just yet, I want you to know that my thoughts and prayers are with you. I know that confronting the prospect of heart valve surgery can be dislocating and uncomfortable. That said, you can always contact me with questions at adam@heartvalvesurgery.com. I'm here to help. So, don't be a stranger!

Keep on tickin!

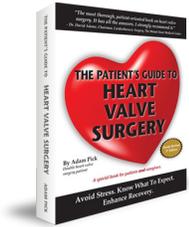
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If you have enjoyed this free download, please turn to the next page to learn more about heart valve surgery.

HeartValveSurgery.com Resources

(You can click the blue links below.)



[Learn From *The Patient's Guide To Heart Valve Surgery*](#)

Read this 200+ page book for heart valve surgery patients, their families and friends. Written by Adam Pick, the founder of HeartValveSurgery.com, this step-by-step guide helps patients avoid stress, know what to expect, and enhance recovery.



[Find Trusted Heart Valve Surgeons](#)

Created by thousands of patients, caregivers, surgeons and cardiac centers, the Surgeon Finder is the world's only patient-recommended database of heart valve surgeons. You can search by location, by name, by problematic valve and by surgical procedure.



[Research Leading Heart Valve Hospitals](#)

To help you research leading cardiac centers that specialize in heart valve treatment, our new 'Heart Hospitals' section was launched in 2012. Now, with a few simple clicks, you can go on virtual tours, meet surgeons, meet nurses, see patient success stories and more.



[Meet Patients In Our Community](#)

You are not alone. Meet patients -- just like you -- at our special community of patients and caregivers. This global community was designed to help you learn from other patients, stay connected with your family and friends, and empower you.



[Visit Adam's Heart Valve Surgery Blog](#)

Ranked as the "#2 Heart Blog" on the Internet by Feedspot, Adam Pick provides patients and caregivers the latest news, technology updates, patient tips, surgeon interviews and patient success stories at his blog.



[Watch Educational Videos](#)

Learn about heart valve disease, diagnosis and treatment options from the world's leading cardiologists and cardiac surgeons.

Thanks To Our Surgeon Team!

HeartValveSurgery.com would like to thank and acknowledge each of the following surgeons for their ongoing support of our patient and caregiver community.



Dr. David Adams

Mount Sinai Medical Center
New York, NY

[See Surgeon Profile](#)



Dr. Patrick McCarthy

Northwestern Memorial Hospital
Chicago, IL

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Dr. Vaughn Starnes

University of Southern California
Los Angeles, CA

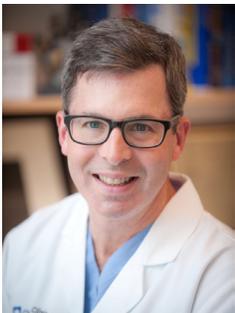
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Dr. Kevin Accola

AdventHealth
Orlando, FL

[See Surgeon Profile](#)



Dr. Marc Gillinov

Cleveland Clinic
Cleveland, OH

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Dr. Marc Gerdisch

Franciscan Health
Indianapolis, IN

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Dr. William Ryan

The Heart Hospital
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