

# A Caregiver's Guide to Rheumatic Heart Disease

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## BACKGROUND

Rheumatic heart disease (RHD) is a chronic condition that represents a global health concern with a persistently high incidence in developing countries according to Seid et al., (2024). It is caused by damage to the heart valves following rheumatic fever, which often results from untreated or inadequately treated strep throat or scarlet fever. While preventable, RHD remains a leading cause of cardiovascular illness in low-resource communities and disproportionately affects Indigenous children worldwide. Limited access to healthcare, delayed diagnosis, and inadequate treatment contribute to the high burden of disease in these populations.

## PURPOSE

The purpose of a caregiver's guide to RHD is to provide families, caregivers, and communities with accessible education about the disease, including prevention, recognition of early symptoms, treatment adherence, and long-term care strategies. To bring awareness that RHD is a preventable cause of cardiovascular death and disability according to Watkins et al., (2017). The guide aims to empower caregivers to play an active role in protecting children from preventable complications and improving their overall quality of life.

## METHODS

This guide uses a community-based educational approach developed after some literature review. It emphasizes culturally sensitive language, simple explanations, and visual aid to help caregivers understand the causes, risk factors, and importance of early treatment for sore throats. Practical guidance on medications adherence, routine medical check-ups, and lifestyle support is included. In many programs, the guide is delivered through workshops, handouts and collaboration with local healthcare providers.



## Prevention is Key

- Increase awareness to families and the community
- Educate Caregivers of early diagnosis of strep throat/scarlet fever
- Treat strep throat with antibiotics to prevent RHD



## RESULTS

Implementation of caregiver-focused education has shown improved awareness of strep throat and its links to RHD. Caregivers who receive guidance are more likely to see timely medical treatment for sore throats, adhere to prescribed prophylactic antibiotics, and follow up with medical appointments. Early detection and proper care reduce the progression of rheumatic fever into RHD and decrease the incidence of severe heart complications in children.

## CONCLUSIONS

RHD is a preventable but serious condition that continues to disproportionately affect Indigenous and underserved populations. Caregivers play a critical role in prevention and management. Providing them knowledge and practical tools through an RHD guide empowers families to take proactive steps in protecting children, reducing disease burden, and promoting healthier futures in vulnerable communities. The study by Woods et al., (2025) recommends to identify potential missed diagnoses of acute rheumatic fever and RHD during hospital-based care to reduce future complications.

## REFERENCES

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