



Cheney's Back Surgery Risky, But Necessary, Doctors Say

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At 68 years old, former Vice President Dick Cheney is no stranger to health problems.

A victim of four heart attacks, Cheney also suffers from lumbar spinal stenosis, a narrowing of the spinal canal that is a common cause of lower back pain in older adults.

Cheney was undergoing elective surgery Thursday to deal with his back problem, leading some to ask: Can someone with his history of heart problems tolerate surgery?

"The risks are assessed by the level of his heart function," said Dr. Nieca Goldberg, director of New York University's Women's Heart Center, who has not treated Cheney. "The concerns are to make sure his pain management is good post-operatively. That will lower his stress."

Goldberg said if Cheney were to have another heart attack, the time to have a heart complication would be after a surgery is performed. However, he will be monitored closely, so it should not be a problem.

"People are living longer, so they have more than one health condition, and sometimes they are going to need surgery," said Goldberg. "The good news is, when they get anesthesia, the heart is monitored continuously, as is the oxygenation of his blood."

Cheney likely met with his cardiologist before the surgery to assess whether the risks outweigh the benefits, and to make sure he is on a stable level of medicine, Goldberg said.

"I would not do surgery on someone who recently had a heart attack, but his heart attack was several years ago," she said.

The narrowing of the spinal canal — the passage for the spinal cord — puts pressure on nerves, causing pain. Surgery is done to widen the passage and ease that pressure, typically by removing a bit of the vertebrae.

Dr. Kevin Plancher, an orthopedic surgeon and head of Plancher Orthopedics and Sports Medicine in New York City, said he would hope Cheney had a stress test prior to surgery, to see if his heart was strong enough. But he said people like Cheney need this surgery, because lumbar spinal stenosis can make it difficult for a person to walk, and patients with heart disease need exercise.

"The blood is not pumping efficiently to his legs, so it may be tiring for him, he may feel his legs are too heavy or numb," Plancher added. "Not being able to walk is a problem because he needs exercise to keep his heart healthy."

Cheney underwent the surgery at George Washington University Hospital. His office said the procedure "went well."

The Associated Press contributed to this story.