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## Thoracic endovascular aneurysm repair in patients with connective tissue disorders

The contemporary data regarding the role of the thoracic endovascular aneurysm repair (TEVAR) in patients with connective tissue disorders (CTD) are reviewed. We performed search of the data in electronic databases PubMed, SCOPUS, Embase, Google Scholar OVID, related to the use of TEVAR. Currently, there is a limited amount of large cohort size studies outlining the use of TEVAR in patients with CTD. Endovascular prosthetics of the thoracic aorta in patients with accidents is dangerous because of the progressive dilatation of the aorta and the high probability of further re-interventions in later life. The analysis showed that open reconstruction still remains a gold standard of intervention in young patients with progressive CTDs, especially in acute type of aortic dissection. However, long-term data need to be published to support this practice.

**Key words:** aorta, thoracic, dilatation, aneurysm, dissecting, aortic diseases, endovascular procedures.

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Connective tissue is a supporting structural material found throughout the body. It consists of proteins such as collagen and elastin, providing extracellular binding and support in various tissues and organs [66]. Hereditary genetic abnormalities may lead to the connective tissue disorders (CTDs), tissue degeneration and loss of structural integrity [15].

More than 50 connective tissue diseases are known. The most common CTDs associated with aortic disease are Marfan syndrome (MFS), vascular Ehlers – Danlos syndrome (EDS), and Loews – Dietz syndrome (LDS) [51]. Aortic disease is the most prevalent cause of high morbidity and mortality in this patient population, and surgical repair is one of the main treatment options available [13]. Aorta, being exposed to a high pressure because of constant blood flow, becomes weakened; therefore, it is at increased risk of developing aneurysm, rupture, and

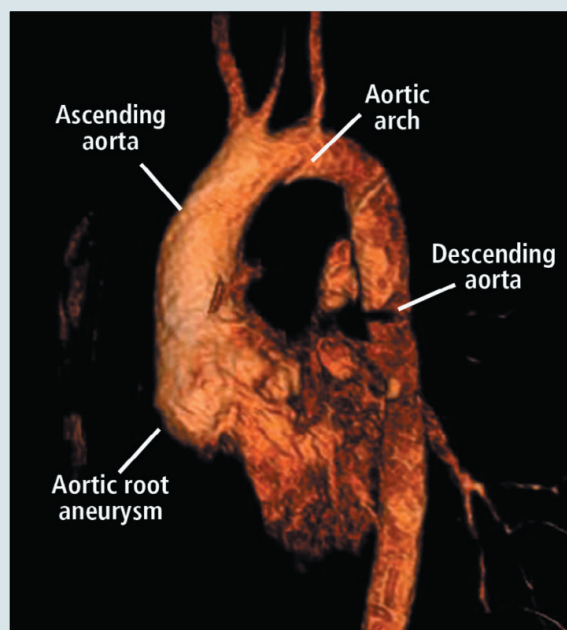
dissection [14]. According to the existing guidelines, open surgical aortic prosthetics is a gold standard of treatment in this cohort of patients. However, most patients with CTD may require several aortic surgeries during their lifetime. Recent studies have shown that endovascular aortic prosthesis has a lower success rate in patients with CTD, and therefore it is not a method of choice in this population.

This article aims to review the current literature data to determine the role of endovascular thoracic aortic prosthetics in patients with CTDs. A comprehensive literature search has been conducted in the main electronic databases (PubMed, SCOPUS, Embase and Google Scholar) to identify articles discussing use of the thoracic endovascular aneurysm repair (TEVAR) in patients with CTDs. Three main diseases affecting aorta are Marfan syndrome, vascular Ehlers – Danlos syndrome and Loews – Dietz syndrome.

## Marfan syndrome

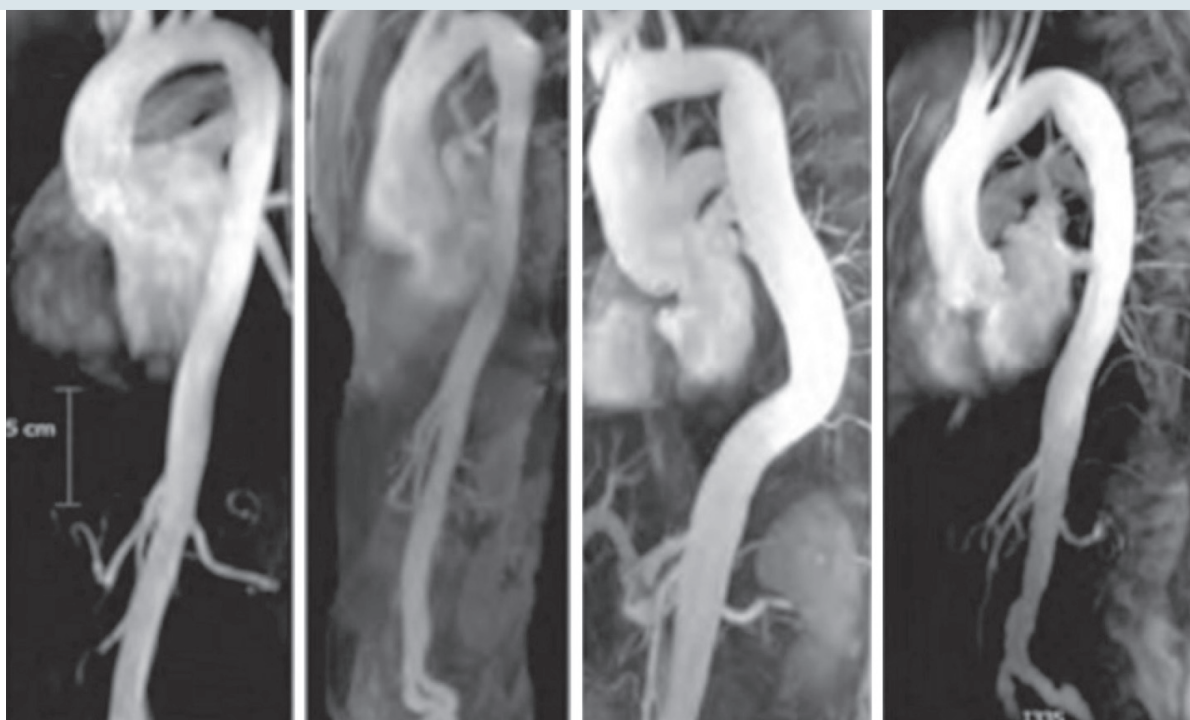
MFS occurs in approximately 2-3 cases in 10,000 people [46] and is diagnosed according to a set of clinical data known as the revised Ghent criteria [61]. The disease is caused by an autosomal dominant mutation in the fibrillin-1 gene (FBN1). The FBN1 gene is located on chromosome 15q21.1 and is responsible for the production of proteins that form the extracellular matrix involved in the attachment of smooth muscle to collagen and elastin fibers [14, 46], increasing structural integrity of the aortic walls (Fig. 4). Transforming growth factor- $\beta$  (TGFB) becomes overactive in the presence of the defective FBN1 gene and causes inflammation and aortic fibrosis. This results in weakness of the aortic wall, leading to the expansion and formation of aneurysms, appearing in approximately 80 % patients with MFS [46]. The aortic ring, root, and ascending aorta are the sites most often affected by progressive weakening [68] (Fig. 1).

Valsalva sinus dilatation starts already in utero [4]. As the patient grows, increasing the size of the aorta increases the likelihood of rupture [48]. Adults with aortic root diameter  $> 45$  mm are advised to consider surgery. A fixed diameter requiring surgery in children has not been established. However, growth by more than 1 cm per year, problems with valve insufficiency and Z-index  $> 2-3$  in the diameter of the aortic root are considered as unfavorable prognostic factors [66].

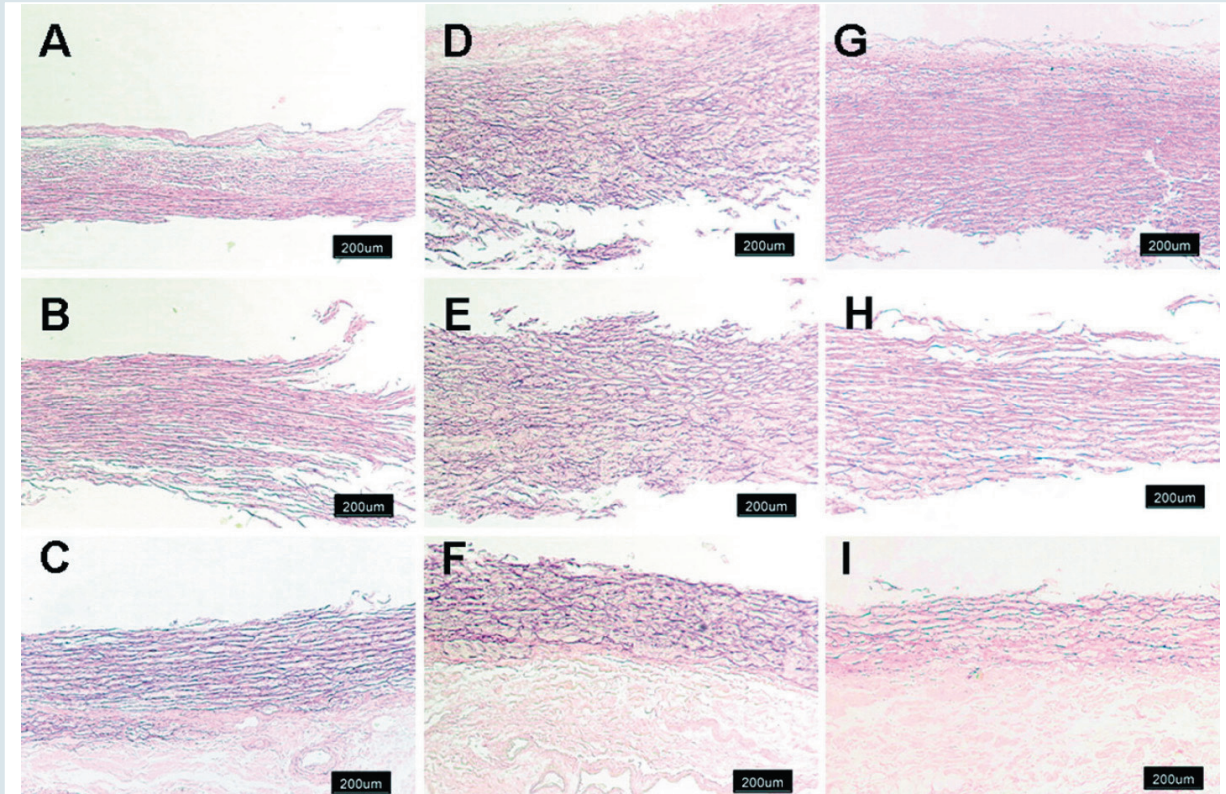


**Fig. 1. A three-dimensional computed tomography of aorta showing aortic root aneurysm in a patient with Marfan syndrome [50]**

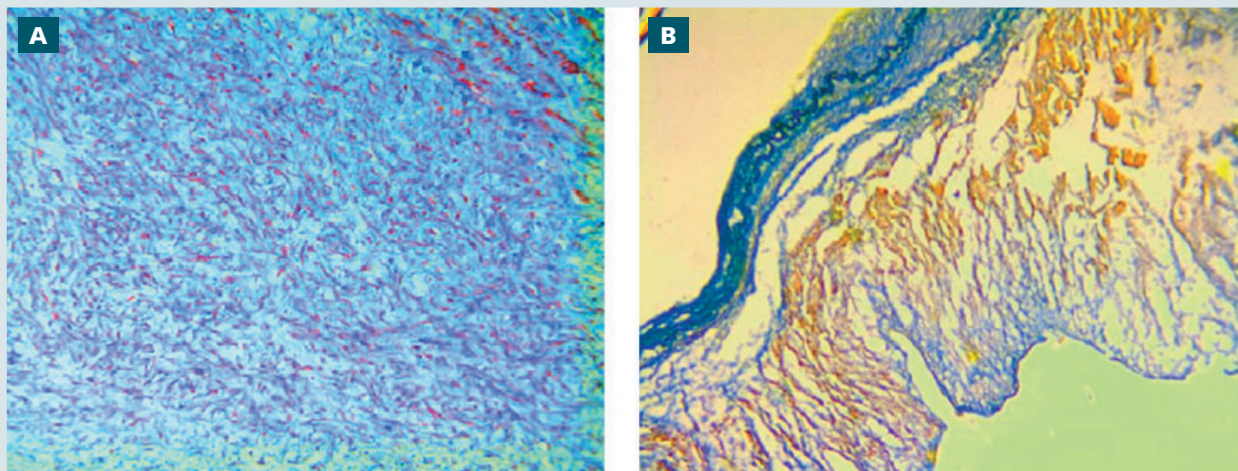
The average life expectancy of patients with MFS is about 60 years [22]. *Figures 1 and 2* show examples of aneurysms and descending thoracic dissection, and *Figures 3 and 4* show aortic tissue histology in Marfan patients [2, 3, 56, 60].



**Fig. 2. Aortic imaging of a patient with Marfan syndrome showing dilatation of the thoracic aorta [38]**



**Fig. 3. Histology and separation of aortic tissue for proteomic analysis. Van Gieson elastic stain of aorta from representative control (A through C) and aneurysmal aorta from Marfan syndrome (MFS) patients (D through F) and bicuspid aortic valve patients (G through I) are shown. Aorta from MFS patients presents fragmentation of elastic fibers and thickened aortic wall (magnification  $\times 4$ ). Intima with media (A, D, and G), separated media (B, E, and H), and media with adventitia (C, F, and I) are shown [42]**



**Fig. 4. Marfan aortic tissue showing cystic medial necrosis with (A) smooth muscle fragmentation and more collagen deposition, Masson's trichrome stain  $\times 200$ ; and (B) proliferation and disruption of the intima (blue), and smooth muscle cell fragmentation (yellow) and collagen deposition (red) in the media. VG-Victoria blue bichrome staining  $\times 100$  [71]**

### Ehlers – Danlos syndrome

EDS refers to a range of genetic disorders affecting collagen production; therefore, it results in joint and skin defects, as well as tissue fragility [13]. There are seven main classifications of EDS, with vascular EDS type IV [3] being most commonly related to cardiovascular complications. In vascular EDS, there is a mutation in the COL3A1 gene which encodes type III procollagen [34, 62]. Type III procollagen makes up the highest proportion of collagen in the aortic wall; therefore, its defect results in severe aortic wall fragility and increased risk of rupture [34, 54]. Vascular EDS usually affects the descending or abdominal aorta [57], and the risk of rupture, unlike MFS, can occur with any diameter [57]. A high incidence of vessel rupture reduces the life expectancy of vascular EDS patients to about 48 years, as opposed to 60 years in MFS patients [57].

### Loeys – Dietz syndrome

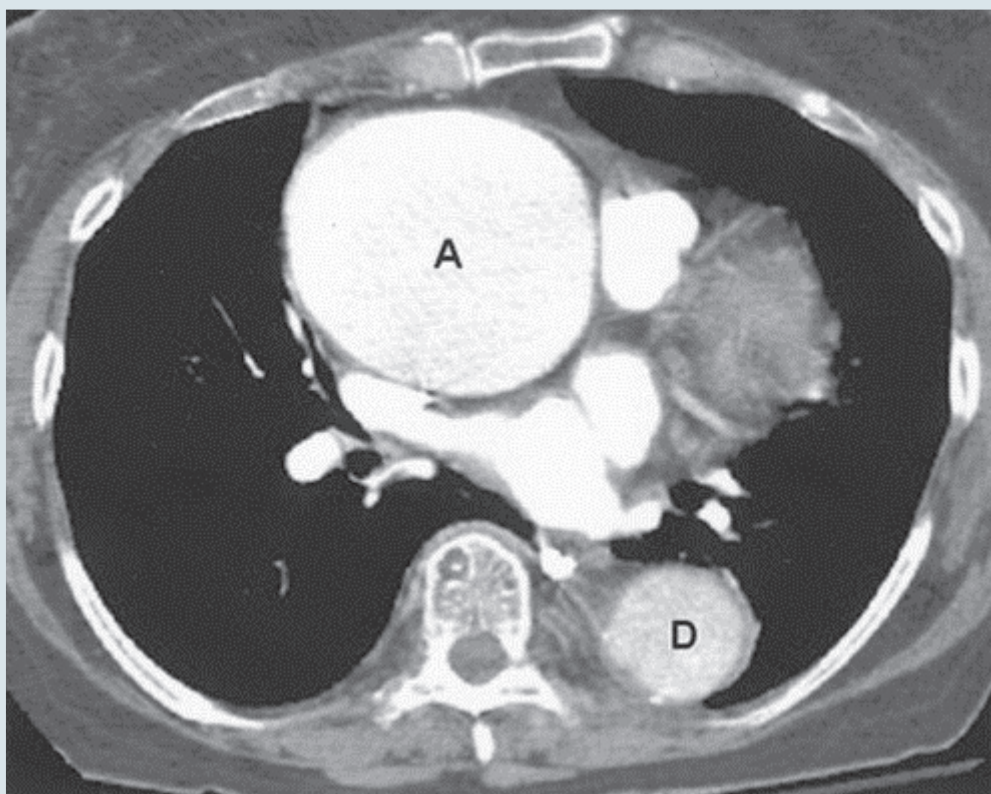
LDS is caused by a heterozygous mutation in the TGFBR1 and TGFBR2 genes, which encode TGFBR receptors I and II, respectively. The mutation triggers an increase in collagen production, while reducing the production of elastin and disrupting

the assembly of elastin fibers. LDS is categorized into two main groups, namely, type 1 and type 2. Both conditions can cause vascular diseases in the form of aortic aneurysm, arterial tortuosity, and aortic dissection [34, 54]. Unlike MFS, in LDS, the aortic root is prone to rupture and dissection during childhood and at even smaller diameters. Aneurysms occur less frequently in LDS, at a rate of 9 % [1]. However, the aorta is prone to the increased growth rate and can sometimes be as twice as its normal size in the thoracic region [31]. Close monitoring as well as early surgical intervention are advised to prevent catastrophic outcomes. However, the mean life expectancy for LDS patients remains low, at about 37 years, although sporadic cases have been reported to live as late as 70 years of age [37, 45].

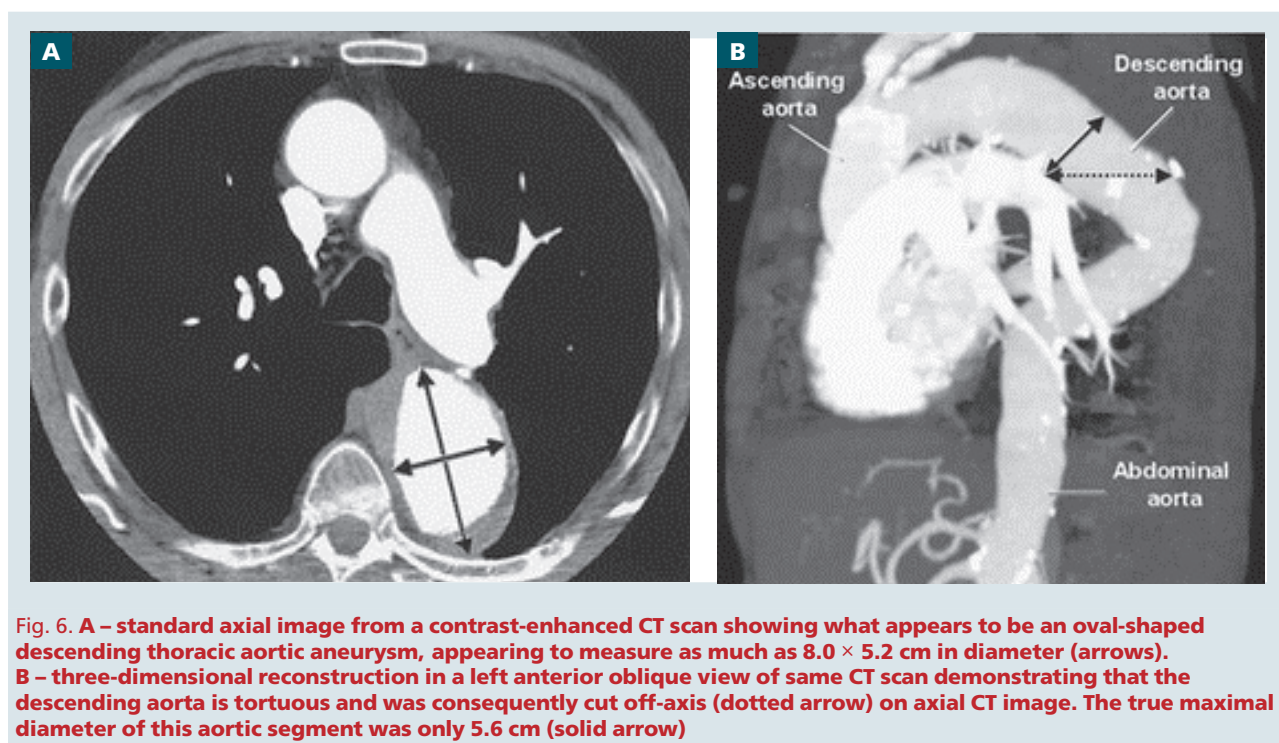
### Diagnosis of the aortic aneurysm

Most patients with thoracic aortic aneurysms are asymptomatic at the time of diagnosis, because aneurysms are typically discovered incidentally on imaging studies (chest X-ray, CT scan, or echocardiogram) ordered for other indications (*Fig. 5*).

A true aortic aneurysm is defined as a localized dilatation involving all three layers of the aorta. The diameter should be at least 1.5 times that



**Fig. 5. Contrast-enhanced CT scan demonstrating a 7.5 × 8.3 cm ascending thoracic aortic aneurysm. A – indicates ascending; D – descending**



**Fig. 6. A – standard axial image from a contrast-enhanced CT scan showing what appears to be an oval-shaped descending thoracic aortic aneurysm, appearing to measure as much as  $8.0 \times 5.2$  cm in diameter (arrows). B – three-dimensional reconstruction in a left anterior oblique view of same CT scan demonstrating that the descending aorta is tortuous and was consequently cut off-axis (dotted arrow) on axial CT image. The true maximal diameter of this aortic segment was only 5.6 cm (solid arrow)**

of the normal diameter to be considered as true aneurysm. Thoracic aortic aneurysm (TAA) may occur in the aortic root/ascending aorta (60 %), aortic arch (40 %), and the descending aorta including the thoracoabdominal aorta (10 %) [7]. The normal aortic diameter varies with age, gender, as well as ranges in population. *E.g.*, a diameter  $> 4.5$  cm is considered aneurysmal in the United States of America, whereas a diameter  $> 4$  cm is defined as aneurysmal in South Korea,  $> 4.2$  cm – in Ukraine [20].

TAAAs are associated with CTD and can lead to aortic incompetence, rupture, and acute dissection. This is the leading cause of premature death in patients with MFS. The pathological hallmark of aneurysmal disease in CTD is cystic medial necrosis, which results from degenerative disruption of collagen, elastin, or smooth muscle, leading to weakening of the arterial wall [35].

Early diagnosis and treatment before the development of life-threatening complications is a key to managing TAAAs. Useful imaging modalities include chest X-rays, transthoracic and transoesophageal echocardiography, multidetector computed tomography (CT) of aorta, and magnetic resonance (MR) angiography (Fig. 5). Clinically, contrast-enhanced CT of aorta is a standard imaging technique to diagnose aortic pathology with sensitivity up to 100 % and specificity up to 99 % [28].

A better understanding of genetics and inheritance patterns has allowed to improve screening for aortic disease. Consensus guidelines were developed

in 2010 by the American College of Cardiology and the American Heart Association; the key recommendations include [16]:

- First-degree relatives of patients with aortic dissection or TAAAs should be screened with aortic imaging to identify asymptomatic disease.
- MFS patients should have an immediate echocardiogram to assess the aorta and followed up in six months to check for enlargement.
- Patients with LDS should have complete aortic imaging immediately and six months later to check for enlargement and annual MR imaging from cerebrovascular circulation to the pelvis.

Once a diagnosis of TAA is established in a patient with underlying connective tissue disease, the primary treatment option is open surgical repair. Another important aspect in the management of patients developing aortic pathology is hypertensive control. Hypertension increases risk and accelerates the rate that pathology develops, therefore antihypertensive therapy is important in the management of aortic aneurysms [59].

The European Association of Cardiothoracic Surgery (EACTS), the European Association of Cardiologists and the European Association of Percutaneous Coronary Intervention in 2012 didn't recommend endovascular treatment in this group of patients. They emphasized that TEVAR is not recommended for patients with connective tissue disease unless the technique is considered as a rescue procedure or bridge before final open surgery or as a procedure after preoperative aortic surgery when

both landing areas lie within previously placed synthetic grafts [69].

The risk of intervention should be considered while deciding upon the treatment of TAA. That is why it must be balanced with the risk of rupture or dissection. Patients with a 6 cm aneurysm have a risk of annual rupture or dissection of 6.9 % and a mortality risk of 11.8 %. Risks increase significantly with aneurysms > 6 cm [69]. Current guidelines address the following factors [43] when considering an intervention:

- Aortic dilatation > 5 cm in patients with MFS, which is a lower threshold compared to the general population (> 5.5 cm) (IC level). Patients with a family history of acute exfoliation, severe aortic or mitral regurgitation, and a rate of increase of 3 mm / year have a lower surgical threshold, still with a diameter > 4.5 cm (IIC level) (Fig. 7).

- Women with MFS contemplating pregnancy may undergo aortic root and ascending aorta replacement at a diameter of 4 cm as per American and Asian guidelines (level IIC), while European guidelines recommend a diameter > 4.5 cm.

In patients with LDS, an aortic diameter > 4 cm for the aortic root, > 5 cm for the descending thoracic aorta, and rate of increase > 0.5 cm/year are considered an indication for surgery, regardless of location [16].

## TEVAR compared to the open repair

Today, among the leading specialists, open surgery is preferred for the restoration of thoracic aneurysms in patients with connective tissue diseases [23]. In such patients, the aortic wall is particularly fragile, and the radial force arising from stent graft placement may increase the circumferential load. Long-term radial force is a prerequisite for adequate fixation and sealing during stent graft deployment.

Nowadays, there are limited studies confirming the appropriateness of TEVAR in patients with FTA. A total of 81 % of the procedures were technically successful, with the stent transplant landed proximally. The rate of immediate complications is usually low: 1.9 % risk of death, 1.9 % risk of stroke, < 2 % risk of spinal ischemia, and 3.7 % risk of open surgery. However, long-term results have not yet been fully reported and need further evaluation with an appropriate follow-up period [36].

The re-intervention rate due to primary and secondary endoleaks is high and retrograde dissection can occur in patients undergoing TEVAR. The incidence of stent graft-induced re-entry tears is also significantly high, with 33 % reported in Marfan patients compared to 3 % in the general population and a mortality of nearly 30 % [26].

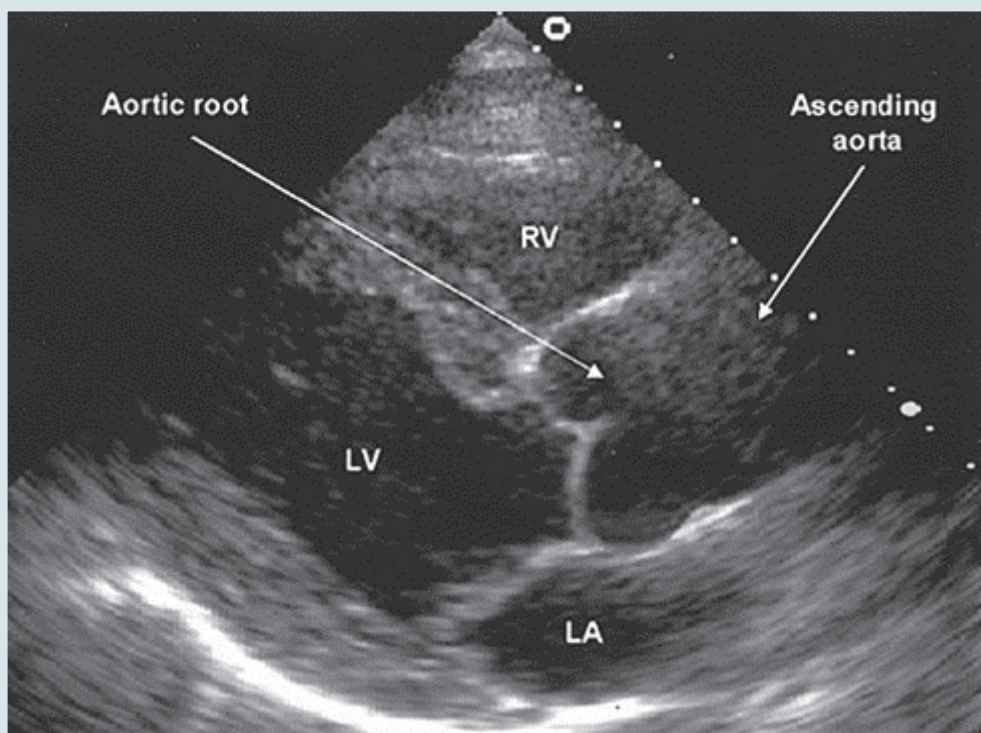


Fig. 7. A transthoracic echocardiogram, in a parasternal long-axis view, demonstrating a dilated aortic root (4.4 cm) and ascending aorta (4.2 cm). Whereas the aortic root is well visualized, the ascending aorta is less so, as is often the case with transthoracic imaging. RV – indicates right ventricle; LV – left ventricle; LA – left atrium

Endovascular repair is also not recommended for vascular EDS. In this cohort, even invasive angiography, unless absolutely necessary, is to be avoided due to the high risk of vessel rupture, with one study showing a 67 % complication rate and 12 % mortality rate for digital subtraction angiography [9].

### Future of the open repair

There have been no large studies directly comparing open surgical repair and endovascular repair in CTD patients. However, open surgery for aneurysm repair is a well-established technique with a low complication rate as it has a 100 % technical success rate. The perioperative mortality has been shown to range from 0 to 11.5 %, with an overall survival rate of 53–96 % [67]. The morbidity includes a risk of up to 6.5 % for paraplegia, risk of up to 13 % for permanent renal failure, and risk of up to 11 % for re-exploration for bleeding [4].

The complication rate in open surgery can be reduced by using extracorporeal partial left heart bypass, intraoperative cold renal perfusion, and cerebrospinal fluid drainage. It is also important to use branched grafts rather than visceral patches. In one review, visceral patches were used in 107 patients including 17 CTD patients [33, 41]. Visceral patch aneurysm expansion occurred in eight patients, among them three had CTD, which is a predisposing factor to patch aneurysm formation. The morbidity rate for open repair of patch aneurysm is 20–30 %, which is high compared to the primary operation and endovascular repair [10].

Endovascular surgery has a technical success rate ranging from 38 % to 100 % with a primary treatment failure rate of up to 44 %. Treatment failure may occur due to type I or type II endoleak, retrograde dissection, and ongoing dilatation of the false lumen in chronic dissection. The aorta distal to the stent graft fails and patients may develop recurrent aneurysms and acute dissections. The mortality rate ranges from 0 to 25 % with an overall survival of 75 to 100 %, which is comparable to open surgery, although only few studies have been done on small cohorts [39, 63]. This is encouraging as it shows endovascular therapy may safely be done in the short term, although concerns exist regarding longer-term outcomes and effectiveness. The perioperative morbidity includes a risk of paraplegia up to 3.3 %, risk of permanent renal failure up to 6.7 %, and risk of re-exploration for bleeding in up to 14 % of patients [41].

In view of the lower morbidity, endovascular therapy is possibly an option in patients who have

an especially high risk of open surgery, such as elderly patients with multiple comorbidities [12]. However, patients with connective tissue diseases do not fall into this category as they tend to be younger and otherwise healthier. As it is a simpler and quicker technique, TEVAR is also recommended in emergency situations, such as aortic rupture, where it can be life-saving [12]. Endovascular repair is especially useful when the proximal and distal landing zones exist and is recommended in such situations (e.g., focal intercostal patch aneurysm, as part of the frozen elephant trunk procedure or hybrid procedures where a synthetic graft has been inserted previously via open surgery). The complication rate from endovascular therapy can be reduced further by using ultrasound guidance to obtain vascular access.

TEVAR does have a limited role in the management and treatment of aortic disease in patients with CTD, however due to the tissue and vasculature of these patients causing technical difficulties, open surgical repair is still a preferred treatment option. TEVAR also does not have better outcomes than open surgical repair, which still means open repair is the preferred treatment option. TEVAR may be the preferred treatment in selective patient groups who are at high risk of mortality or increased morbidity from open surgery; with further advances and improving outcomes over time, TEVAR could offer an alternative to open surgery in patients with multiple comorbidities.

In the period from 2008 to 2022, 42 patients with descending aortic aneurysm underwent TEVAR surgery at the Heart Institute. Among them, no patients with FTA were identified by genetic testing, however, phenotypically 6 of the patients had signs of connective tissue disease. They all received endovascular aortic prosthetics. In the remote period (after 6 months), there were no cases of reimplantation. These data may suggest that this technique should be considered for this cohort of patients, but the selection of patients should be personalized.

### Conclusion

Open repair remains a gold standard method of intervention in young patients with progressive CTD, especially in the setting of acute type A aortic dissection. However, TEVAR can be sought as a reliable alternative in emergency setting of diseases involving the descending thoracic aorta; yet the long-term data needs to be published to support such practice.

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### Ендоваскулярне протезування грудного відділу аорти в пацієнтів із захворюваннями сполучної тканини

У статті проаналізовано сучасні наукові погляди на визначення ролі ендоваскулярного протезування грудного відділу аорти (TEVAR) у сучасних наукових публікаціях у пацієнтів із захворюваннями сполучної тканини (ЗСТ). Використано загальний пошук статистики в електронних базах даних: PubMed, SCOPUS, Embase, Google Scholar OVID, а також підтверджено результатами власних спостережень використання TEVAR у невідповідні години надання медичної допомоги. Результати досліджень проаналізовано в оглядовому форматі. Роль TEVAR оцінено відповідно до кожного дослідження. Наразі існує обмежена кількість великих когортних досліджень, які описують використання TEVAR у пацієнтів із ЗСТ. Протезування грудного відділу аорти ендоваскулярним протезом у пацієнтів із ЗСТ небезпечно дилатацією аорти, яка прогресує, та високою ймовірністю подальших повторних втручань у старшому віці. Встановлено, що відкрита реконструкція досі залишається золотим стандартом втручання в молодих пацієнтів із ЗСТ, які прогресують, особливо при гострому типі розшарування аорти. Однак для підтвердження цієї практики необхідно опублікувати довгострокові дані.

**Ключові слова:** аорта, грудна клітка, дилатація, аневризма, розшарування, захворювання аорти, ендоваскулярні процедури.