

# A star



# is born

*TV personality Star Jones becomes a heart health advocate*

BY LINDA CHILDERS

**S**tar Jones has never been one to back down from a challenge. A lawyer and former prosecutor, Star parlayed her wit, intelligence and savvy interview skills into a successful television career, serving as a legal commentator, co-host on *The View* and, currently, as part of the Today's Professionals panel on NBC's *TODAY* show.

After waging a very public war with her weight, Star underwent gastric bypass surgery in 2003 and lost 162 pounds. Going from a size 26 to a svelte size 6, she increased her energy and confidence, overhauled her diet and lifestyle, and firmly believed she was in the best shape of her life.

So in 2010 when Star began experiencing an array of symptoms, including shortness of breath, intense heart palpitations, fatigue and lightheadedness, she knew something was wrong.

"I was only 47 at the time and at first, I wondered if I might be having some delayed side effects from my weight-loss surgery," Star says. "In retrospect, I should have known my symptoms were all early warning signs of heart disease."

Although Star has a family history of heart disease, she didn't fully understand her risk factors or realize that women of color have an increased risk for heart disease. A



Star visits *TODAY* show hosts Natalie Morales and Savannah Guthrie to get the word out about National Wear Red Day® on February 3, 2012.

2011 *Journal of Women's Health* study, funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office on Women's Health, indicates that 57 percent of Latina women, 40 percent of African-American women and 32 percent of white women have three or more risk factors for cardiac disease. Surprisingly, more than half of these women were significantly less aware than healthier women of the symptoms of a heart attack and of the need to call 9-1-1 if having symptoms.

A visit to her doctor brought about a battery of tests, and an echocardiogram revealed that Star had valvular heart disease and needed surgery to repair a defective aortic heart valve. (To learn more, see *Understanding valvular heart disease* below.)

## Understanding valvular heart disease

There are four valves in a person's heart including the mitral, tricuspid, aortic and pulmonic valves. The aortic valve is located between the left ventricle (lower heart pumping chamber) and the aorta, which is the largest artery in the body. (See *The normal heart and how it works* on page 7.) Valves maintain one-way blood flow through the heart. The aortic valve may be abnormal at birth or degenerate over time, a condition usually seen in older patients.

Although valvular heart disease is the third most common cause of heart problems in the United States, Bonow notes that some of the risk factors for heart valve disease, such as high blood pressure, can be managed with prevention. "Many people with heart valve disease don't have any symptoms, or minimal symptoms, and their condition can stay the same throughout their lives without causing any health problems. Others do well with medicines that can ease the pain of symptoms but don't cure valve disease," he says. "In some cases, heart valve disease can gradually worsen until symptoms develop and surgery is required."

Symptoms of valvular heart disease include:

- shortness of breath
- irregular, rapid heartbeats
- weakness
- dizziness or fainting
- swelling of the feet, ankles or abdomen
- pressure-like discomfort in the chest.

"I heard the news no one ever wants to hear," Star says. "My doctor told me I needed to have open-heart surgery immediately to repair my heart valve and to drain fluid that had been building up around my heart."

Despite her reputation as a no-nonsense former prosecutor who established herself as a formidable competitor on the reality TV show *Celebrity Apprentice*, Star admits the thought of having open-heart surgery terrified her.

"When my doctor told me that they were going to crack my chest open, I sincerely considered not having the surgery. I stuck my head in the sand for over two weeks," Star says. "And then one of my best friends, who is also a doctor, convinced me to have the surgery rather than putting my life at risk."



Star goes red with Barbara Walters at the 2012 Go Red for Women luncheon in New York City.

## SURGERY AND RECOVERY

One week before her 48th birthday, Star entered the hospital to have her aortic valve repaired and to correct a genetic abnormality. Only after the operation did she fully appreciate that she was able to have the surgery on her own terms.

"I'm glad it was a preventative surgery rather than an emergent one," she says. "I wasn't there because I had a heart attack, and I was getting a valve repair, as opposed to a full valve replacement."

In the United States, surgeons perform about 99,000 heart valve operations each year to repair or replace the mitral or aortic valves. Since the procedure is considered major surgery, Robert Bonow, M.D., a renowned cardiologist and professor of cardiology at the Feinberg School of Medicine at Northwestern University in Chicago,

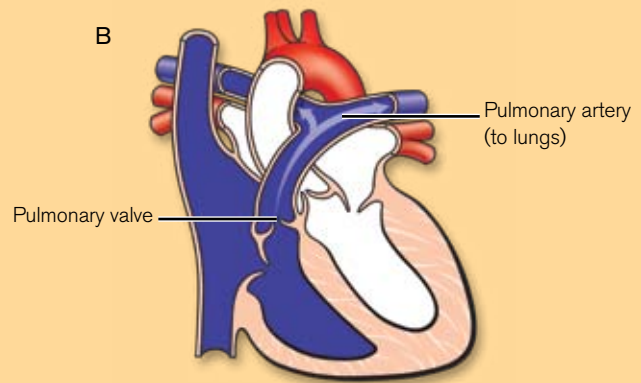
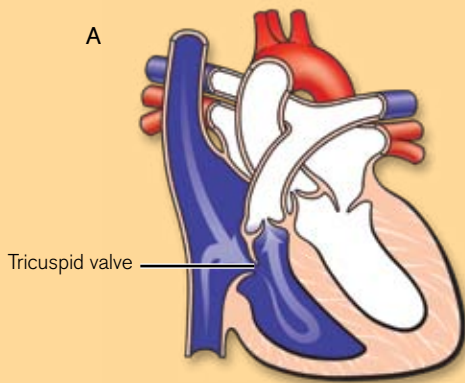
recommends all patients get a second opinion and research their various treatment options when faced with having heart valve repair or replacement.

"People need to know they have choices when it comes to specialty cardiac care," Bonow says. "If a patient is told heart surgery is their only option, it's a good idea to get a second opinion. They also want to find a board-certified heart valve

specialist and a cardiac center that has performed a high volume of valve surgeries."

Bonow notes that in the past decade, some hospitals have also begun offering minimally invasive heart valve surgery, an operation that requires smaller incisions and results in less downtime and discomfort for patients. Although it gives patients another option, not everyone is a candidate for minimally invasive surgery, and

## The normal heart and how it works

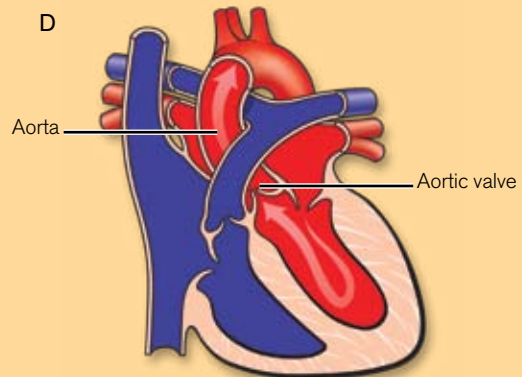
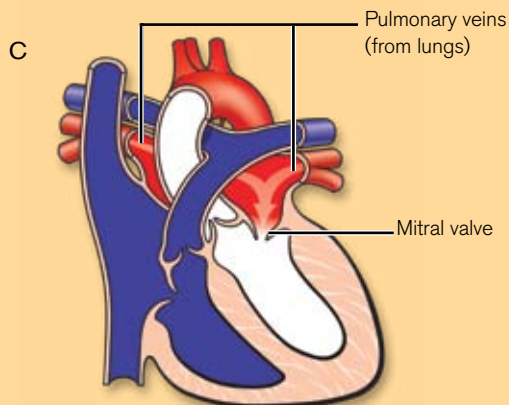


### From the heart to the lungs

The right ventricle pumps the blood under low pressure through the pulmonary valve into the pulmonary artery. From there the blood goes to the lungs where it gets fresh oxygen (B).

### From the lungs to the heart

After the blood is refreshed with oxygen, it's bright red. Then it returns to the left heart through the pulmonary veins to the left atrium. From there it passes through the mitral valve (C) and enters the left ventricle.





Star sparkles as an honoree at the 2012 *Woman's Day* Red Dress Awards.



Bonow advises patients should discuss the advantages and disadvantages of different surgical methods with their doctor.

Six days after her surgery, Star was discharged from the hospital and immediately began an intensive three-month cardiac rehabilitation program.

"I had been hitting the gym regularly after my weight-loss surgery, but the discipline I learned in rehab to strengthen my heart was relentless and exhausting, and so worth it," Star says. "I have no doubt that I would not have survived open heart surgery when I was at my heaviest weight."

Even with her intensely hectic lifestyle, Star makes sure she takes the time to improve and maintain her health. "Women are always there for their husbands, children and friends," she says, "but they also need to make time for themselves, to make their own health a priority." For tips from Star on how busy working women and moms can improve their health, visit [heartinsight.com](http://heartinsight.com) to read our online-only bonus article, "Be your own diva: Get heart healthy with Star Jones."

### **PASSIONATE ABOUT HEART HEALTH**

Along with Star's improved health came a newfound passion to raise awareness about heart disease. Teaming up with the American Heart Association's Go Red for Women® campaign ([GoRedForWomen.org](http://GoRedForWomen.org)), Star, 50, now works to educate others about cardiac risk factors and encourages women to be proactive about their health.

In 2011, Star raised a record-breaking \$170,000 for the American Heart Association when she competed on *Celebrity Apprentice*. Star has also spoken to members of Congress about heart disease and stroke prevention as part of the American Heart Association's "You're the Cure on the Hill" event.

"I know I'm alive today because of the extensive research being funded by the American Heart Association," Star says. "I want to use my platform in the media to educate people about the warning signs of heart disease and the importance of early detection and regular medical exams." ■