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Robin Williams' Heart Surgery: What's the Prognosis?

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Despite a [personal history of alcoholism](#), a family history of heart failure and being forced to cancel a comedic tour due to a heart-related problem, 57-year-old Robin Williams will likely emerge safely from his upcoming heart surgery, heart doctors agree.

According to Associated Press reports, Williams canceled four shows of his "Weapons of Self-Destruction" tour in Florida earlier in the week after he experienced shortness of breath and was taken to a Miami hospital.

In a statement issued Thursday, Williams' publicist, Diane Rosen, said that the renowned comedian and actor needs an aortic valve replacement -- the same type of surgery that former first lady [Barbara Bush](#) underwent on Wednesday. Bush is reportedly recovering well from her operation.

Williams was also quoted in the statement as saying, "I'm so touched by everyone's support and well wishes... This tour has been amazing fun and I can't wait to get back out on the road after a little tune-up."

Williams' publicists have not revealed when or at what hospital his surgery will take place. A message left for further comment was not immediately returned.

But though details remain scarce, heart doctors said [aortic valve replacement](#) today is a fairly routine procedure and that Williams will likely emerge unscathed.

"The prognosis is actually quite good, assuming that the procedure is limited to the aortic valve they are replacing," said Dr. Timothy Gardner, president of the American Heart Association and medical director of the Center for Heart and Vascular Health for the Christiana Care Health System.

"In someone who is healthy, despite being in their late 50s, there is a very low operative risk of failure, death or complications."

Dr. Richard Shemin, chief of the Division of Cardiothoracic Surgery at the UCLA David Geffen School of Medicine, noted that the procedure is not an uncommon one, even in patients as young

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HOT RI

1



2



3



4



5



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as Williams.

"Aortic valve replacement surgery is quite commonly performed these days," he said.

According to statistics from the American Heart Association, surgeons in the United States performed 17,592 aortic valve procedures in 2007. On average, these patients spent only eight days in the hospital after their surgeries.

Williams' Brother Died of Heart Failure

"It is not a no-risk procedure; this is open heart surgery," Gardner said. But he added that he believes that the risk of complications associated with this procedure, including death, is less than 5 percent.

Past Alcoholism Likely Won't Affect Chances

If Williams has had any prior heart difficulties, he has kept them from the media. However, Williams' family has not been untouched by heart disease. In 2007, his brother Robert Todd Williams passed away from heart failure at the age of 69.

Williams has also openly admitted a battle with alcoholism, which sent him to a rehabilitation clinic in 2006 after 20 years of sobriety. Two months after he checked himself in, [he spoke to anchor Diane Sawyer](#) on "Good Morning America" about the continuation of his struggle with alcoholism, as well as cocaine abuse, in the early 1980s.

Past research has shown that heavy drinking over time can damage the heart and increase the chances of certain cardiovascular illnesses. However, Gardner said Williams' specific condition is almost certainly unrelated to his past alcoholism.

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