

UW Health: Woman's life changed thanks to innovative heart valve procedure

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MADISON, Wis. – Holly Herlitzke was born with a congenital heart defect that caused her aortic valve to narrow over time, leaving her with an agonizing choice.

Around her 32nd birthday, she had two options. One would be to place a mechanical valve into her heart that would require her to take medications for the rest of her life and can make physical activity challenging. As an active mom of two young kids, who loves hiking and archery, this would have been very difficult. Luckily the other option was perfect for her, which is exactly why her cardiologist at Gundersen Health System in La Crosse, Wisconsin, recommended she take a trip to UW Health.

Herlitzke was an ideal candidate for the Ross procedure, according to Dr. Petros Anagnostopoulos, cardiothoracic surgeon, UW Health.

“The Ross procedure is perfect for active adults under 50, in part because it does not often require medications like blood thinners that can make exercise and other daily activities more challenging or risky,” Anagnostopoulos said. “And we are one of the busiest programs in the Midwest for this surgery.”

This surgery replaces a person's damaged aortic valve with their own pulmonary valve, then replaces that pulmonary valve with a deceased donor's pulmonary valve. These valves are two of the heart's four valves that enable blood to flow through the heart and the body at the right time and in the right direction. The pulmonary valve leads to the lungs, allowing blood to pick up oxygen and the aortic valve, the largest blood vessel, brings oxygenated blood to the body.

Following the procedure and recovery time, patients who receive the Ross procedure can anticipate a normal life expectancy, improved quality of life, good blood flow and low risk of blood clots.

Herlitzke, a resident of Coon Valley, a town near La Crosse, was also thrilled to find out UW Health is a top Adult Congenital Program with expertise in the Ross procedure, and it was only a couple of hours away from home. In fact, the UW Health Congenital Heart Program is considered a specialized referral center for this procedure, so patients have come from across the United States for the surgery in Madison.

“After speaking with my cardiologist in La Crosse, I knew this procedure was the right choice for me,” Herlitzke said. “I’m so glad to have found leading experts on this surgery in my backyard.”

Since the procedure, which took place in December 2021, Herlitzke continues to enjoy archery and hiking with her family, and has started to run as well. She is now able to run miles every day and hopes to run a 5K sometime in 2022.

“I’m so thankful for my care at UW Health,” she said. “Thanks to Dr. Anagnostopoulos and my whole care team, I’m able to continue to live the life I love and even challenge myself with new activities like running.”

Visit [UWHealth.org](https://www.uwhealth.org) to learn more about the [Ross procedure](#).

Video and interviews with Herlitzke and Anagnostopoulos are available.