



A Beating Hope: Ho Zhiliang's Journey with Cardiac Exposure Syndrome

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INTRODUCTION

In the bustling heart of Wuhan, a young man is clinging to hope—and to life—in a way most cannot imagine. Ho Zhiliang, 24, was born with a rare and life-threatening condition called congenital cardiac exposure syndrome, a disorder so severe that over 90 percent of affected infants die shortly after birth. Against all odds, Zhiliang has survived into adulthood with his heart abnormally positioned outside the protective walls of his ribcage, pulsing just beneath the skin.

DESCRIPTION

This rare condition, medically known as ectopia cordis, is a congenital defect in which the heart is located partially or completely outside the thoracic cavity. In most cases, it is associated with other abnormalities, and survival rates are grim without immediate surgical intervention after birth. But in Zhiliang's case, no such surgery was done. Raised in a rural province of China, he lived a highly restricted life, shielded from physical activity and public exposure, constantly wary of trauma to his chest.

"I always knew I was different," Zhiliang said in a recent interview. "I couldn't run, couldn't play, and had to constantly hide myself under layers of clothing." Despite the physical challenges and the emotional burden, he carried on, eventually finding work and trying to lead a quiet life.

Everything changed when he came across a newspaper article about a man in a similar situation who had successfully undergone corrective surgery. The story ignited a spark in him—a possibility he had never truly considered. Fueled by the hope of a new beginning, Zhiliang made a courageous decision: he quit his job and moved to Wuhan, a city renowned for its advanced medical infrastructure, in search of the same chance at life.

The journey has not been easy. With limited financial resources and a high-risk condition, Zhiliang's case has drawn the attention of several medical experts in Wuhan. Cardiothoracic specialists and surgeons are now evaluating his anatomy through advanced

imaging and diagnostic tests to determine whether surgical correction is feasible. According to the hospital's preliminary statement, the main challenge lies in safely repositioning the heart and reconstructing the chest wall to provide long-term protection without compromising circulation.

Understanding Cardiac Exposure Syndrome

Ectopia cordis, the primary condition Zhiliang suffers from, occurs in about 5 to 8 per million live births. It may be associated with syndromes like pentalogy of Cantrell, involving defects of the sternum, diaphragm, pericardium, abdominal wall, and heart. In its severest form, the heart lies entirely outside the chest, exposed to trauma and infection, with no bony or muscular protection.

Most infants born with ectopia cordis die within days—if not hours—due to infection, cardiac trauma, or respiratory complications. Survival into adulthood, as in Zhiliang's case, is practically unheard of. "It's a medical miracle that he's alive," one doctor said. "His case challenges everything we know about the survivability of this condition."

A Race Against Time

Zhiliang now waits as a multidisciplinary team devises a treatment strategy. Surgery, if approved, will be complex, involving reconstruction of the chest cavity, repositioning of the heart, and possibly the use of synthetic or donor grafts to create a sternum. Postoperative care will be critical to avoid infection, respiratory failure, and heart complications.

Despite the risks, Zhiliang remains optimistic. "I've lived 24 years on borrowed time," he says. "If this surgery gives me a chance to live without fear, to breathe without pain, and to walk in the open—I'm ready."

Support for Zhiliang is growing, with doctors and community members rallying around his story. Fundraising efforts are being considered to help cover the high costs of surgery and post-operative care. His journey is not just one of survival—it is a testament to the strength of the human spirit in the face of overwhelming

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odds **Figure 1.**



CONCLUSION

As doctors plan the delicate operation that may one day place his heart safely where it belongs, Ho Zhiliang stands not just as a patient—but as a symbol of courage, resilience, and hope.