

Aortic Dissection Injuries From Car Accidents

An Experienced Bay Area Attorney Explains What Injury Victims Need to Know

Some [car accident](#) injuries appear obvious right away. Others can be invisible at the scene but may be deadly in the hours that follow. An aortic dissection is among the most dangerous injuries in that second category. It can develop after a violent car crash, produce symptoms that are easy to confuse with other conditions and kill someone before the cause is ever identified.

The aorta is the largest blood vessel in the human body. It carries oxygenated blood from the heart to the rest of the body. An aortic dissection occurs when a tear forms in the inner layer of the aortic wall, allowing blood to surge between the layers of the vessel. The result is a rapidly expanding pocket of blood that can block circulation to vital organs, cause catastrophic blood loss or rupture the aorta entirely. Without fast diagnosis and treatment, the condition is often fatal.

At [Clancy & Diaz, LLP](#), our Bay Area car accident lawyers represent people who have suffered catastrophic injuries in crashes throughout Walnut Creek, Antioch, Brentwood and Pittsburg, including those involving internal vascular trauma as serious as an aortic dissection. Below, you can learn more about this injury, how car accidents cause aortic dissection, why it's so often missed in emergency settings and what it means for a personal injury claim in California.

What Is an Aortic Dissection and Why Is It Life-Threatening?

The aorta runs from the heart down through the chest and into the abdomen. It is the pipeline for almost all of the blood that the heart pumps out. The vessel wall has three distinct layers, and a dissection occurs when the innermost layer tears. Blood under high pressure immediately forces its way into the gap between the inner and middle layers, peeling them apart along the length of the vessel.

As the dissection extends, it can block the openings where smaller arteries branch off from the aorta. When those branches are cut off from blood flow, the organs they supply, including the brain, the spinal cord, the kidneys and the intestines, begin to fail. A dissection in the section of the aorta closest to the heart (called Type A) is especially dangerous because it can interfere with the blood supply to the heart itself or cause the tear to extend into the pericardium, the sac surrounding the heart.

The mortality rate for an untreated Type A aortic dissection increases significantly with every hour that passes without surgical intervention. Even with immediate surgery, this injury carries serious risks. Type B dissections, which occur in the descending aorta further from the heart, are sometimes managed with medication and monitoring rather than surgery, but they carry their own long-term risks, including aneurysm formation and the potential for rupture.

How Do Car Accidents Cause Aortic Dissections?

Traumatic aortic injury from a car accident is caused by sudden, forceful deceleration. In a high-speed frontal collision, the body stops almost instantaneously while the internal organs, including the heart and the aorta, continue moving forward because of inertia for a brief moment before being snapped back. That split-second of differential movement places enormous shear force on the aorta at points where it is relatively fixed to surrounding structures.

The most common site of traumatic aortic injury is the aortic isthmus, the segment just past where the aorta curves, because this section is tethered to the chest while the arch above it is more mobile. The sudden movement differential at this tethering point is where tears most frequently begin. Side-impact crashes, rollovers and any collision that subjects the chest to rapid, severe deceleration can produce the same mechanism.

Seatbelts play a complex role in these injuries. A properly worn seatbelt saves lives by preventing the occupant from striking the steering wheel or windshield, which would be far more likely to cause immediate fatal injury. However, the restraining force of the belt during a severe impact can itself contribute to chest trauma, including the kind of internal vascular stress that can initiate an aortic tear in a very high-speed collision.

What Are the Symptoms of an Aortic Dissection After a Crash?

One of the most dangerous characteristics of a traumatic aortic dissection is that the initial symptoms are often nonspecific, severe but easily attributed to other injuries that are more visually obvious at the scene. Recognizing the warning signs can make the difference between a timely diagnosis and a fatal delay.

- **Sudden, severe chest or back pain** – Often described as a tearing or ripping sensation, this is one of the most characteristic symptoms. In trauma patients, it may be dismissed as rib pain or musculoskeletal injury from the crash.
- **Pain that migrates** – As the dissection extends along the aorta, the pain may move from the chest to the back, into the abdomen or down toward the legs, tracking the path of the tear.
- **Unequal blood pressure or pulse between arms** – When the dissection blocks one of the branches feeding the arms, one arm may register a significantly lower blood pressure than the other. This finding, when detected in an emergency room, is an important diagnostic signal.
- **Neurological symptoms** – Sudden weakness, numbness, vision changes or altered consciousness can result when the dissection compromises blood flow to the brain or spinal cord.

- **Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing** – Especially when the dissection affects structures near the heart, the injury can cause fluid accumulation around the heart or lungs, producing breathing difficulty.
- **Shock** – Pallor, a rapid weak pulse, extreme sweating and a sudden drop in blood pressure can indicate that internal bleeding from the dissection has become severe.

In a car accident patient with multiple injuries, these symptoms can be masked by pain from more visible trauma or attributed to other causes. A person with a broken femur and a rib fracture may be in so much pain from those injuries that the deeper chest and back pain of an aortic dissection is not properly evaluated until the situation becomes critical.

Why Are Aortic Dissections Sometimes Missed in the Emergency Room?

Traumatic aortic injury is not the most common injury after a car accident, and that relative rarity contributes to delays in diagnosis. Emergency physicians are trained to identify and stabilize the most obvious and immediately life-threatening injuries first. In a multi-trauma patient, that often means addressing obvious bleeding, fractures, and head injuries before working through the differential diagnosis for chest pain.

Standard chest X-rays, which are among the first imaging studies ordered in a trauma setting, may show a widened mediastinum (the space in the chest between the lungs) that suggests aortic injury, but this finding is not always present and is not always recognized. A CT scan of the chest with contrast is the definitive imaging study for traumatic aortic injury, but it requires the treating team to have a sufficiently high suspicion of the diagnosis to order it.

When an aortic dissection is missed or diagnosed late after a crash, the consequences can include delayed surgery that allows the dissection to extend, rupture or compromise additional organ systems. In cases where a delayed diagnosis leads to a worse outcome than prompt treatment would have produced, the medical management of the injury itself may become part of the legal picture alongside the original crash. This is a serious and complex area of injury law that benefits from experienced legal representation.

What Does Treatment for a Traumatic Aortic Dissection Involve?

Treatment for a traumatic aortic dissection depends on the type and location of the tear and the overall condition of the patient. Type A dissections involving the ascending aorta and arch require emergency open-heart surgery. The damaged segment of the aorta is removed and replaced with a synthetic graft. This is one of the most complex and high-risk cardiac surgeries performed, requiring cardiopulmonary bypass and specialized surgical teams.

Type B dissections are sometimes managed initially with medication to reduce blood pressure and heart rate, which lowers the forces acting on the tear and allows it to stabilize. When a Type B dissection causes complications such as organ malperfusion or signs of expansion, an endovascular procedure called TEVAR (thoracic endovascular aortic repair) is used to place a

stent graft inside the aorta to seal the tear from within. This approach is less invasive than open surgery but still carries significant risks.

Recovery from aortic dissection surgery is prolonged and demanding. Hospital stays of weeks rather than days are common, followed by months of rehabilitation and close medical monitoring. Many survivors face long-term restrictions on physical activity, lifelong medication to control blood pressure and regular imaging to monitor the repaired vessel for complications. The total cost of treatment, rehabilitation and ongoing care for a traumatic aortic dissection is among the highest of any car accident injury.

How Does an Aortic Dissection Affect the Value of a Car Accident Claim?

An aortic dissection caused by another driver's negligence is among the most serious injuries in any personal injury case. The claim value in these cases is shaped by the severity of the treatment required, the long-term consequences and the disruption to every aspect of the injured person's life.

- **Immediate medical costs are extremely high** - Emergency surgery, an ICU stay, post-surgical hospitalization and specialist care in the acute phase of this injury can generate medical bills that quickly exceed standard insurance policy limits.
- **Long-term care adds substantial ongoing costs** - Lifelong medication, regular imaging studies, follow-up cardiothoracic appointments and the potential for future interventions if the repair site develops complications are all part of the long-term financial picture.
- **Lost income can be significant and prolonged** - Recovery from aortic dissection surgery typically requires months away from work, and some survivors face permanent restrictions that prevent them from returning to their prior occupation.
- **Pain and suffering damages reflect the severity of the trauma** - The near-death nature of this injury, the physical demands of recovery and the lasting psychological impact of surviving a life-threatening internal injury are all factors in the non-economic portion of a claim.
- **Multiple liable parties involved** - In a crash with a commercial vehicle, a distracted driver or a multi-vehicle collision, more than one party may bear responsibility for paying for the accident (known as liability). Identifying all at-fault parties can affect what insurance coverage is available and who's liable for paying for the crash.

California law allows a person injured by another driver's negligence (carelessness) to pursue all categories of these losses. Building a claim that captures the full extent of an aortic dissection injury requires detailed medical records, expert physician opinions and an attorney who understands how to present catastrophic injury damages effectively.

What Evidence Connects an Aortic Dissection to a Car Accident?

Insurance companies in serious injury cases do not simply accept the claim. They investigate, and in cases involving internal vascular injuries, they will scrutinize the medical records to determine when the injury was first documented and whether the mechanism of the crash was severe enough to have caused it. Building a claim that withstands that scrutiny requires specific categories of evidence.

The crash itself must be well-documented. The police report, vehicle damage photographs, witness statements and any available dashcam or surveillance footage establish the severity of the collision and the forces involved. An accident reconstruction expert can provide a formal analysis of the crash mechanics and the forces applied to the occupants, which is particularly important in connecting the deceleration forces of the crash to the mechanism that causes traumatic aortic injury.

The medical record must clearly establish a timeline connecting the crash to the diagnosis. Emergency department records, imaging studies and surgical reports documenting the aortic tear should all reference the crash as the precipitating event. A treating cardiothoracic surgeon's opinion connecting the type and location of the dissection to the mechanics of the collision can be critical when an insurer questions causation. These are the same connections that matter in other serious crash injuries, such as [traumatic brain injuries](#), where proving causation requires more than pointing to a diagnosis.

How Much Is My Aortic Dissection Car Accident Case Worth?

There is no single answer to this question, and anyone who gives you a specific number before reviewing the full facts of your case is not giving you reliable guidance. Every aortic dissection case is different, and the value depends on the specific combination of losses the injured person has sustained. That said, these cases typically involve some of the highest recoveries in personal injury law because the injuries and their consequences are so severe.

- **Emergency medical expenses** – Surgery, intensive care, hospitalization and specialist fees from the acute phase of the injury, which can reach six or seven figures in complex cases.
- **Rehabilitation and follow-up care** – Physical therapy, cardiac rehabilitation, ongoing specialist visits and any additional procedures required during recovery.
- **Future medical costs** – Lifelong medication, regular imaging, long-term cardiothoracic monitoring and the possibility of future interventions if the repair develops complications.
- **Lost income during recovery** – Wages and benefits lost during the weeks or months the injured person is unable to work.

- **Reduced future earning capacity** – When permanent physical restrictions prevent the injured person from returning to their prior occupation or limit their ability to work at the same level.
- **Pain and suffering** – Compensation for the physical pain, the fear of death, the emotional trauma of a life-threatening emergency and the ongoing impact of living with a repaired aorta.
- **Loss of enjoyment of life** – When permanent restrictions prevent the injured person from activities they previously enjoyed, that loss is a recognized category of damages in California.

The only way to understand how much your case may be worth is to have an experienced car accident attorney review your medical records, your economic losses and the circumstances of the crash. At Clancy & Diaz, LLP, we do that during a free initial consultation.

How Can a Bay Area Car Accident Lawyer Help With an Aortic Dissection Claim?

Our Bay Area car accident lawyers at [Clancy & Diaz, LLP](#) handle catastrophic injury claims throughout Northern California, including cases involving traumatic aortic dissections and other life-threatening internal injuries. We work with medical experts and accident reconstruction specialists to build the evidentiary foundation these cases require. We pursue every available source of compensation, whether through insurance negotiation or litigation, and we do not back down when insurers resist paying the full value of a catastrophic claim.

Our [case results](#) reflect our commitment to pursuing the full value of serious injury cases. Attorney Pete Clancy is a lifetime member of the Multi-Million Dollar Advocates Forum, a distinction reserved for attorneys who have obtained multi-million dollar verdicts or settlements on behalf of their clients. Catastrophic injury cases like aortic dissections are exactly the kind of high-stakes litigation we are built to handle.

Don't underestimate the complexity or the severity of your aortic dissection car accident case. Make sure you give your car accident injury claim or lawsuit the best opportunity for success. [Contact us](#) and schedule your free consultation with a Bay Area car accident attorney you can trust.