As a term, “心腹” (xin4 fu4) means “trusted aides,” “confidant.” When your trusted aides become a disease to you, they are even more dangerous than those who are openly your enemy.

So the idiom means, figuratively, “dangerous enemy within,” “serious danger of betrayal or revolt from those closest,” “serious hidden trouble or danger,” “big threat from within.”

Another version of the idiom is “心腹之患” (xin1 fu4 zhi1 huan4). In this version, “大患” (da4 huan4) is changed to “患,” “disease.” But even without explicitly stating the seriousness of the disease, any disease that is growing inside you can’t be good.

Terms containing the character “患” (huan4) include:

- 患病 (huan4 bing4) – fall sick
- 災患 (zai1 huan4) – disaster
- 為患 (wei2 huan4) – to be a constant source of trouble
- 後患 (hou4 huan4) – future troubles