



Arrhythmia

What is it?

Most of us have felt our heart race or skip a beat. It's fairly normal every once and a while. But for some people, it's a sign of arrhythmia – a disorder of your heart rate or rhythm – that needs to be checked out by a specialist.

If you have an arrhythmia (there are multiple types), your heart either beats:

- too fast
- too slow or
- with an irregular pattern

This change in your heart rhythm is usually caused by a “glitch” in your heart’s electrical activity, which tells the heart when to contract and pump blood to the body. Your heart doesn’t beat with the regularity of a Swiss watch, and many factors can cause an irregularity.

Some of these factors include:

- having had a heart attack
- having heart failure
- blood chemistry imbalances
- abnormal hormone levels
- alcohol, caffeine and other substances or medicines
- a variety of inherited abnormalities

Did You Know?

Our heart beats an average of 70 to 80 times a minute and over 100,000 times a day! It's no wonder millions of people notice palpitations such as skipping a beat, fluttering or a racing heart.

8 Tips for Staying Heart Healthy with Arrhythmias

Living with an arrhythmia varies tremendously from one person to the next. It will depend on the type of arrhythmia you have, how serious it is and the recommended treatment. Some people can take a single medication to correct their heart’s rhythm; others undergo electrophysiology studies or require a pacemaker or implantable defibrillator.

No matter what kind of arrhythmia you have, there are things you can do to keep your heart healthy and ticking as it should. Here are some tips:

1. Get it checked out. If you have a history of arrhythmias or suspect you have an arrhythmia, it's important to see a specialist and stick with your treatment plan.



2. Stay in sync with your heart. Make sure you and your loved ones know the symptoms of an irregular heartbeat. Symptoms of arrhythmias may include:

- Fast or slow heart beat
- Skipping beats
- Lightheadedness, dizziness or blackout
- Chest pain
- Shortness of breath
- Paleness
- Sweating

Although many arrhythmias are not dangerous, some can be life-threatening. Tell your doctor if you have any of these symptoms, if your arrhythmia seems to be getting worse or if you notice any other changes in the way your heart beats.

3. Know how to check your pulse. Find your pulse on the inside of your wrist (along the same side as your thumb). Gently place your pointer and middle fingers here. Once you feel the thumping of your pulse, count the number of beats for 15 seconds. Multiply this number by four to determine how many times your heart beats in one minute. Pay attention to whether your beats seem evenly spaced or not, or if they are too fast or too slow. Let your doctor know if something seems amiss.

4. Adopt a healthy lifestyle. As with all heart problems, the choices you make every day can make a difference in your symptoms and general heart health. Eating a diet rich in fiber and low in fat, getting regular exercise (that is appropriate for your condition and fitness level), maintaining a healthy weight and quitting the habit if you smoke can help keep your heart healthy and prevent many arrhythmias from getting worse.

“Arrhythmias span a whole spectrum that runs from no symptoms at all, to shortness of breath or feeling an extra heartbeat to life threatening situations causing sudden death and virtually everything in between.”

- Douglas P. Zipes, M.D.,
Distinguished Professor,
Indiana University School of
Medicine and Editor of
HeartRhythm

5. Cut down on caffeine and alcohol. Some people’s hearts are very sensitive to caffeine and/or alcohol. Talk with your doctor about whether you should stay away from caffeinated beverages like coffee, tea and some sodas, alcohol and certain medications. Also let your doctor know if you notice that certain activities or foods trigger your heart to beat abnormally.

6. Stay on top of your heart health. If you have an arrhythmia, it’s important to keep track of other risk factors for heart disease. This includes knowing your cholesterol levels, blood sugar level, blood pressure and weight. If any of these numbers are high, talk with our doctor about your target goals and how to keep them under control.



7. If you are prescribed a medication, take it as directed. Whatever your treatment, follow your doctor's advice. Always let your doctor know about any side effects you experience or if you can't afford your medication. Never stop, skip or change the amount (dose) of medication without talking to your doctor first. Also, be sure to check with your doctor about taking any dietary supplements since these "natural" substances can affect heart health.

8. Relax. Prolonged stress and anxiety can affect your body and your heart. Take care of yourself and try to lower stress levels by setting limits, getting a massage, signing up for a yoga class, meditating or engaging in other activities that help you to relax.

Questions to Ask Your Health Team

Think about and write down questions or concerns you have before each appointment so that you don't forget. Here are some examples:

- What type of arrhythmia do I have?
- Are there certain activities or foods that I should avoid?
- Why is it important to get my heart rate back to normal?
- Why do I need to take a blood thinning medication?
- What can I do to prevent my arrhythmia from getting worse?
- Does my arrhythmia need to be monitored? If so, how?
- What are the signs and symptoms that my arrhythmia is becoming more serious?

For more information, visit CardioSmart at www.CardioSmart.org.