

Heart Palpitations

What are palpitations?

Palpitations is a term used for the feeling that your heart is beating harder, faster, or slower than usual or that it is skipping beats. Sometimes palpitations are uncomfortable.

Palpitations are common and often normal. They are a symptom, not a disease. However, it is important to find out if they are a symptom of an abnormal heart rhythm.

What is the cause?

Palpitations may be brought on by:

- Exercise or other physical activity
- Stress, anxiety, or fear
- Problems with sleep, such as sleep apnea
- Smoking, alcohol, or taking in too much caffeine
- Health conditions such as heart problems, anemia, thyroid problems, low blood sugar, or a lack of certain vitamins or minerals
- Medicines, such as diet pills and decongestants

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms may include:

- A thumping, pounding, or racing feeling in your chest or neck
- A fluttering feeling in your chest
- A feeling of irregular beating or skipped beats
- A feeling of irregular beating or skipped beats

How are they diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will ask about your symptoms and medical history and examine you. Tests may include:

- An ECG (also called an EKG or electrocardiogram), which measures and records your heartbeat. You may have an ECG while you are resting or while you exercise on a treadmill. You may also be asked to wear a small portable ECG monitor for a few days or longer.
- An echocardiogram, which uses sound waves (ultrasound) to show the structures of the heart and how well the heart is pumping

How are they treated?

Treatment of palpitations depends on the cause. If a medical problem is causing palpitations, treating the medical problem usually helps the heart go back to a normal rhythm. Your provider may prescribe medicines to control them if they continue and you have bothersome symptoms. Or perhaps changing some of the medicines you take will decrease or stop the palpitations.

If they are not caused by an underlying medical problem, no treatment may be needed. Drinking less coffee or alcohol may be all you need to do. It may also help if you try to reduce the stress in your life, get more sleep, or quit smoking if you smoke. Talk with your healthcare provider about lifestyle changes that might help.

How can I take care of myself?

Keep a record of when, how often, and for how long you have each episode of palpitations. It's helpful for your healthcare provider to know if the palpitations start and stop suddenly or gradually. Note what you are doing when they start and any other symptoms you have with the palpitations.

If you have heart disease, high blood pressure or another medical problem, follow your treatment plan. Be sure to take all medicines as prescribed by your provider.

Try to have a heart-healthy lifestyle:

- Eat a healthy diet.
- Try to keep a healthy weight. If you are overweight, lose weight.
- Stay fit with the right kind of exercise for you.
- Learn ways to manage stress.
- Get enough sleep. Ask your healthcare provider if you may need to be checked for sleep apnea. (If you have sleep apnea, there are many times during your sleep when you stop breathing for more than 10 seconds at a time.)
- If you smoke, try to quit. Talk to your healthcare provider about ways to quit smoking.
- If you want to drink alcohol, ask your healthcare provider how much is safe for you to drink.

Ask your provider:

- How and when you will hear your test results
- How long it will take to recover
- What activities you should avoid and when you can return to your normal activities
- How to take care of yourself at home
- What symptoms or problems you should watch for and what to do if you have them

Make sure you know when you should come back for a checkup.

How can I help prevent palpitations?

Talk to your healthcare provider about your personal and family medical history and your lifestyle habits. This will help you know what you can do to lower your risk for heart disease.

Developed by RelayHealth.

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