

Patient information factsheet

Heart palpitations

We have written this factsheet to help you understand more about heart palpitations. It explains what heart palpitations are and what causes them. We hope it will help to answer some of the questions you may have. If you have any further questions or concerns, please speak to a member of your healthcare team.

What are heart palpitations?

Heart palpitations are heartbeats that suddenly become more noticeable. You may experience rapid, thumping or fluttering feelings in your chest.

Heart palpitations may seem alarming, but in most cases they're harmless and are not a sign of a serious problem.

What causes heart palpitations?

Lifestyle triggers

Common lifestyle triggers of heart palpitations include:

- strenuous exercise
- not getting enough sleep
- drinks that contain caffeine (such as coffee, tea and energy drinks)
- spicy foods
- alcohol
- smoking
- illegal drugs (such as cocaine, heroin, amphetamines, ecstasy and cannabis)

In these cases, the heart palpitations should go away on their own. Avoiding these triggers may help stop them from coming back.

Emotional or psychological triggers

Heart palpitations are also often caused by emotions or psychological issues, such as:

- excitement or nervousness
- stress or anxiety
- panic attacks (an overwhelming sense of anxiety or fear, accompanied by feeling sick, sweating, trembling and palpitations)

Doing breathing exercises and learning how to deal with a panic attack may help if you're feeling stressed, anxious or panicked.

Medicines

Heart palpitations can occasionally be triggered by certain medicines, including:

- asthma inhalers (such as salbutamol and ipratropium bromide)
- high blood pressure (hypertension) medicines (such as hydralazine and minoxidil)

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- antihistamines (such as terfenadine)
- antibiotics (such as clarithromycin and erythromycin)
- antidepressants (such as citalopram and escitalopram)
- antifungal medicines (such as itraconazole)

Speak to your GP if you think a medicine may be causing your heart palpitations. It is important that you **do not** stop taking a prescribed medicine without first getting medical advice.

Hormone changes

Heart palpitations in women can sometimes be the result of hormonal changes that happen during:

- periods
- pregnancy
- the menopause (when a woman stops having periods and is no longer able to get pregnant naturally)

In these cases, the heart palpitations are usually temporary and not a cause for concern.

Heart rhythm problems

Heart palpitations are sometimes caused by a problem with the heart rhythm (arrhythmia), such as:

- atrial fibrillation (this is the most common type, where the heart beats irregularly and faster than normal)
- atrial flutter (a fast and irregular heartbeat)
- supraventricular tachycardia (an abnormally fast heart rate)
- ventricular tachycardia (a more serious condition where the regular heartbeat is typically fast and can be associated with dizziness or blackouts)

Heart conditions

Some heart palpitations may be associated with other types of heart conditions, such as:

- a problem with the heart valves (such as mitral valve prolapse)
- hypertrophic cardiomyopathy (where the heart muscle and walls of the heart become enlarged and thickened)
- heart failure (where the heart is unable to pump blood around the body properly)
- congenital heart disease (birth defects that affect the normal workings of the heart)

Some of these conditions can be serious and often need treatment.

Other medical conditions

The following conditions can also sometimes cause heart palpitations:

- an overactive thyroid (this is called hyperthyroidism and happens when the thyroid gland produces too much of the thyroid hormones)
- a low blood sugar level (this is called hypoglycaemia and is most commonly associated with diabetes)
- types of anaemia (a reduced number of red blood cells)
- postural or orthostatic hypotension (dizziness and low blood pressure triggered by changing position, such as standing up)
- a high temperature (38°C or above)
- dehydration

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When should I see my GP about heart palpitations?

You should make an appointment to see your GP if:

- your heart palpitations don't improve or get worse
- your heart palpitations become unbearable
- you are concerned about the heart palpitations

You may also wish to consider purchasing a recording device to monitor your heart rhythm. KardiaMobile heart monitor (AliveCor) is a portable single-lead electrocardiogram (ECG) recorder. The monitor works together with the Kardia app to analyse the ECG recording. The Kardia app can be downloaded on a compatible mobile device, such as a smartphone or a tablet. KardiaMobile is approved by the UK medicines and health care products regulatory agency to be used for this purpose.

When should I get emergency help?

Call **999** for an ambulance or go to your nearest emergency department immediately if you have heart palpitations and experience any of the following symptoms:

- severe shortness of breath
- chest pain or tightness
- dizziness or light-headedness
- fainting or blackouts

These symptoms could indicate a serious or potentially life-threatening heart problem that should be checked by a doctor straight away.

Useful links

www.nhs.uk/conditions/heart-palpitations

www.bhf.org.uk/information-support/conditions/palpitations

The information in this factsheet has been adapted from the NHS website:

www.nhs.uk/conditions/heart-palpitations

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For help preparing for your visit, arranging an interpreter or accessing the hospital, please visit **www.uhs.nhs.uk/additionalsupport**