

Overview

Heart palpitations are sensations during which you may feel like your heartbeat is pounding, racing, or fluttering.

Palpitations are fairly common, and they generally occur due to simple extra heartbeats called premature atrial contractions (PACs) or premature ventricular contractions (PVCs).

Rarely, the palpitations are due to more worrisome heart problems.

Symptoms

Symptoms of heart palpitations may include a passing sensation of a pounding, rapid, fluttering, or skipped heartbeat. These sensations are usually felt in the chest, but may also be felt in the neck and/or the throat.

Generally, there are 2 broad types of palpitations.

1. NOT WORRISOME:

These are very common.

They are felt as a skipped heartbeat (ie “my heart did not beat for a second”), followed by a strong thump or heartbeat.

Most people report that they feel as if the heart stopped for a second, then started right up again. There may be a strong thump once or twice.

Some may feel “woozy” or lightheaded for a second.

This is more noticeable at night when you are lying down, or at other times when you are sitting quietly, and after meals.

These are due to PACs or PVCs. Most people have some PACs throughout the day, but do not notice them. **Only when things are quiet, do they become more noticeable and bothersome.**

2. WORRISOME palpitations.

These are not common. Here, there is a series of several fast heartbeats in a row, one after the other (**not just one beat**). It may go on for a few minutes or may go on for hours. These fast heartbeats may be regular or irregular. This type of palpitation may indicate something more serious.

- Fainting or feeling faint or dizzy for more than a couple of seconds while you are still having palpitations.
- Breathing difficulty while you are still having palpitations
- Feeling confused or disoriented
- Back, neck, stomach, or jaw pain or tightness while you are still having palpitations

These symptoms, occurring together with heart palpitations, may indicate a more serious heart condition or a medical emergency.

Causes

There are numerous potential causes of heart palpitations.

The more “simple” or common type of palpitations are due to PACs or PVCs. Interestingly, many people have PACs etc, but most people don't feel them, although some people do feel them. These skipped heartbeats are made more prominent by:

- High stress and anxiety
- Pregnancy
- High intake of stimulants, such as caffeine
- Smoking or nicotine use
- Other heart conditions
- Dehydration
- Overactive thyroid gland
- Medications, such as pseudoephedrine (Sudafed), beta blockers for heart disease, or asthma inhalers

The more uncommon types of palpitations, the fast, persistent palpitations, may be a true heart arrhythmia. A wide range of heart problems can cause these. We will typically evaluate you for these arrhythmias, based on your symptoms and our examination of you.

Digestive disorders may also result in heart palpitations. Gallstones, gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD), or simple indigestion can cause your symptoms. Even asthma or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) may be the underlying cause.

Treatments

Treatment depends on the cause of the palpitations.

If the palpitations are due to PACs or PVCs, then the treatment is generally reassurance, and an explanation of why they occur. These symptoms are not life threatening. No additional testing is necessary in these cases.

Additional strategies can include:

- Avoiding stimulants like caffeine.
- Using relaxation techniques such as meditation or breathing exercises if the palpitations are due to stress.
- Quitting smoking, if you smoke.
- Eating a healthy, nutritious diet.

If we determine that the palpitations are due to a more serious heart condition, then we will let you know about the various options, including medications or surgery.

We may ask you to track your palpitations by writing down when they occur, how long they last, precisely what they feel like, and any accompanying symptoms.