

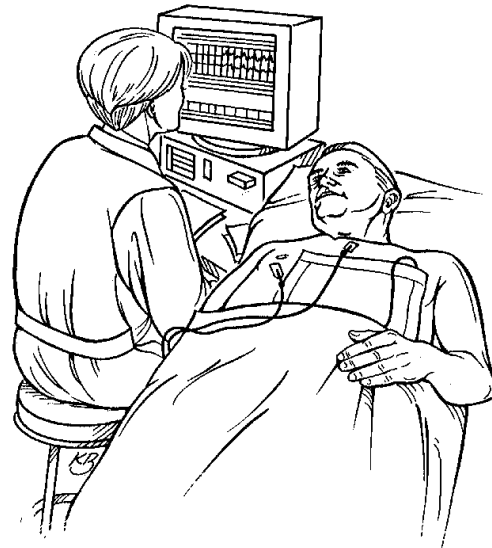


# What Is an Arrhythmia?

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An arrhythmia is an abnormal rhythm of the heart. It may feel like a temporary pause and be so brief that it doesn't change your overall heart rate. Or it can cause the heart rate to be too slow or too fast. Some arrhythmias don't cause any symptoms. Others can cause symptoms such as lightheadedness or dizziness.

There are two basic kinds of arrhythmias. Bradycardia is when the heart rate is too slow — less than 60 beats per minute. Tachycardia is when the heart rate is too fast — more than 100 beats per minute.



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## What are the signs of arrhythmia?

- When it's very brief, an arrhythmia can have almost no symptoms. It can feel like a skipped heartbeat that you barely notice.
- It also may feel like a fluttering in the chest or neck.
- When arrhythmias are severe or last long enough to affect how well the heart works, the heart may not be able to pump enough blood to the body. This can cause you to feel tired or lightheaded or may make you pass out. It can also cause death.
- Tachycardia can reduce the heart's ability to pump, causing shortness of breath, chest pain, lightheadedness or loss of consciousness. If severe, it can also cause heart attack or death.

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## How are arrhythmias treated?

Before treatment, it's important for the doctor to know where an arrhythmia starts in the heart and whether it's abnormal. An electrocardiogram (graphic record of electrical impulses made by the heart) is often used to diagnose arrhythmias. Using a Holter monitor, exercise stress tests, tilt table test and electrophysiologic studies ("mapping" the electrical system of your heart) are other ways to find where arrhythmias start. Treatment may include:

- Lifestyle changes
- Medicine to prevent and control arrhythmias and to treat related conditions such as high blood pressure, coronary artery disease and heart failure
- Anticoagulants to reduce the risk of blood clots and stroke
- A pacemaker that uses batteries to help your heart beat more regularly
- Cardiac defibrillation and implanted cardioverter defibrillators (ICDs)
- Cardiac ablation
- Surgery

## What is defibrillation?

- It's a way of returning an abnormal heartbeat to normal with a very brief electric shock.
- An implantable cardioverter defibrillator (ICD) may be placed under the skin of the upper chest to give shocks and/or work as a pacemaker. It knows when the heartbeat isn't normal and works 24 hours a day.

## What is ablation?

- It's a way to fix an arrhythmia and get your heart to beat normally.
- It's done by putting a thin tube (a catheter) in your vein and guiding it to the heart muscle.

The tip of the catheter delivers a burst of energy that destroys very small areas of heart tissue that cause abnormal electrical signals.

## How can I learn more?

1. Talk to your doctor, nurse or other health-care professionals. If you have heart disease or have had a stroke, members of your family also may be at higher risk. It's very important for them to make changes now to lower their risk.
2. Call 1-800-AHA-USA1 (1-800-242-8721) or visit [americanheart.org](http://americanheart.org) to learn more about heart disease.

3. For information on stroke, call 1-888-4-STROKE (1-888-478-7653) or visit [StrokeAssociation.org](http://StrokeAssociation.org).

We have many other fact sheets and educational booklets to help you make healthier choices to reduce your risk, manage disease or care for a loved one.

Knowledge is power, so *Learn and Live!*

## What are the warning signs of heart attack and stroke?

### Warning Signs of Heart Attack

Some heart attacks are sudden and intense, but most of them start slowly with mild pain or discomfort with one or more of these symptoms:

- **Chest discomfort**
- **Discomfort in other areas of the upper body**
- **Shortness of breath with or without chest discomfort**
- **Other signs including breaking out in a cold sweat, nausea or lightheadedness**

### Warning Signs of Stroke

- **Sudden weakness or numbness of the face, arm or leg, especially on one side of the body**
- **Sudden confusion, trouble speaking or understanding**
- **Sudden trouble seeing in one or both eyes**
- **Sudden trouble walking, dizziness, loss of balance or coordination**
- **Sudden, severe headache with no known cause**

Learn to recognize a stroke. Time lost is brain lost.

Call 9-1-1 ... Get to a hospital immediately if you experience signs of a heart attack or stroke!

## Do you have questions or comments for your doctor?

Take a few minutes to write your own questions for the next time you see your healthcare provider. For example:

*Can my arrhythmia be cured?*

*Will I have to keep taking medicine?*

