

PALPITATIONS

Palpitations are the sensation of an abnormal heart rate or rhythm, often described as a fluttering or thumping in the chest, and abnormally fast pulse or the sensation that the heart has paused and skipped or missed a beat.

Although they are usually benign, palpitations can be caused by thyroid disorders, anemia, abnormalities in electrolytes, and abnormalities in the electrical system of the heart. When you see a clinician, they will take a detailed history and may order certain tests including blood tests, an electrocardiogram (EKG) and/or a cardiac monitor.

What to Do About Palpitations

If your clinician has referred you to see a cardiologist about your palpitations, please follow through with scheduling this appointment, since the cardiologist will be able to consider additional tests that can determine whether an underlying heart problem might be contributing to your symptoms.

Palpitations and Anxiety

When we feel our heart rate change, that sensation can also cause stress or fear, which can then speed up the heart in response. Sometimes it can be hard to tell whether the abnormal heart rate started first, or the stress/panic response started first. Almost all "panic attacks" involve a high heart rate and other associated sensations, like pressure in the chest, shortness of breath and sometimes sweating or even nausea/vomiting or abdominal pain.

Palpitations that don't seem to be associated with an underlying medical condition can occur more frequently during times of stress and with the use of certain substances, so some things you can do to reduce the frequency of palpitations include:

- Decreasing or eliminating caffeine, alcohol, and other drug consumption
- Getting plenty of sleep on a consistent basis and remain well hydrated
- Taking measures to reduce the amount of stress and anxiety in your life; meeting with a counselor or behavioral health provider can be a good first step toward this goal

Keeping a Symptom Diary

It can be very helpful for medical providers to better understand your condition if you keep a symptom diary. To create a symptom diary, write down your heart rate (beats per minute) when you feel symptoms, how long it lasts, as well as any other associated symptoms (dizziness,

pain in your chest (breathing difficulty), potential triggers, or anything that helps relieve your symptoms. You can keep this information in a small notebook or a note on your phone.

To quickly check your heart rate, place two fingers on the inside of the opposite wrist, just below the thumb. Once you can feel your heartbeat consistently, count the number of times you feel a beat in 6 seconds, and then add a zero to that number to roughly calculate your pulse (beats per minute).

PLEASE SEEK URGENT MEDICAL ATTENTION if you experience chest pain, shortness of breath, loss of consciousness, dizziness with palpitations, or palpitations that last longer than 10 minutes or do not resolve with rest.