

# Health Tips

Your Good Health Information From eDocAmerica

with

Dr. D



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## Health Tip: Palpitations, harmless or cause for concern?



Palpitations are the unpleasant and sometimes alarming sensations of rapid, irregular or forceful beating of the heart. The term palpitations is fairly non-specific since it can refer to a number of different types of disturbances of the heart's normal "rhythm". Depending on the specific type of rhythm disturbance, palpitations may be described as "skipped beats", "pounding" or "racing". This description often gives doctors a clue to the underlying cause. In most instances, palpitations do not represent a serious medical problem, and in fact, in certain instances, may even be considered normal.

Normally, the heart beats between 60-100 times per minute. When the heart beats faster than this, it is called "tachycardia". In some instances, a tachycardia can be considered to be normal. For example, when you are exercising vigorously or frightened, your heart normally beats faster and more forcefully. This allows the heart to pump more blood to the muscles and lungs. If, on the other hand, heart "racing" occurs while you are at rest, this may indicate a "dysrhythmia" or abnormal heart rhythm. Another common dysrhythmia is known as premature contractions or ectopic beats. These are usually described as "skipped beats" or as the heart briefly "stopping". Palpitations of this type, occur when the heart beats earlier than the next normal beat, resulting in a pause. When the heart resumes beating, a more forceful beat or "thump" may be felt. When these occur infrequently, they may be entirely benign. If, on the other hand, premature contractions occur frequently they can be an indication of a serious medical problem.

### What causes palpitations?

Some of the most common causes for palpitations are:

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- Diseases of the heart valves (mitral valve prolapse, aortic stenosis, etc.)
- Excess thyroid hormone (hyperthyroidism)
- Stress, fear, anxiety
- Fever
- Caffeine, nicotine, cocaine, diet pills
- Anemia
- Low blood oxygen level (hypoxia)
- Medications such as thyroid replacement, diet pills and asthma drugs



### Palpitation “red flags”

Those who have known heart disease or risk factors for heart disease (high cholesterol, hypertension, diabetes, etc.) should consider palpitations to be a significant problem until proven otherwise. Actual blackouts or near blackouts associated with palpitations should also be taken seriously because they often indicate the presence of underlying heart disease. Chest pain or shortness of breath occurring during episodes of palpitations suggests that the heart is not pumping adequately and should also prompt medical evaluation.

### Evaluating palpitations

Since palpitations can be “normal” or a benign process, or can be due to a serious medical problem, it is often necessary to undergo medical evaluation to determine the underlying cause. The object of the evaluation is to determine if the palpitations are “physiologic” or whether they are caused by certain heart-related and non-heart related problems. Evaluation starts and is sometimes clinched with the medical history. The circumstances under which



the palpitations occurred (drinking too much coffee, drinking alcohol, stressful work situation) are one of the key issues to be considered. A review of medications that one is taking as well as symptoms that could suggest a medical problem such as hyperthyroidism or anemia is also done. Following this, a physical examination and often a resting electrocardiogram is performed. If the

cause is still in question, a heart rhythm monitor (Holter scan) and blood tests are usually the next step. Occasionally, specialized testing such as an electrophysiologic study, echocardiogram or coronary artery catheterization may be necessary, particularly if the palpitations cause serious or life-threatening problems.

### Treating palpitations

Palpitations can be relieved in many patients by stress reduction, stopping cigarettes, and reduction of caffeine and alcohol. Depending on the underlying cause, however, specialized procedures to the heart or medications may be necessary. Should palpitations occur frequently, cause alarm, or if any of the “red

flags” mentioned previously are present, medical attention should be sought. Please contact us at eDoc if you have any questions about palpitations and we’ll be happy to provide you with additional information.

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