

Patient information

Heart Palpitations

Integrated Emergency and Medical Pathways division

Understanding Heart palpitations

This leaflet explains heart palpitations, their common causes, when to seek medical advice after discharge from hospital and when you may need urgent medical attention.

What Are Heart palpitations?

Heart palpitations are episodes when you become more aware of your heartbeat. Your heart may feel as though it is racing, pounding or thumping in your chest, fluttering, skipping beats or beating irregularly.

Although palpitations can feel worrying, they are often harmless and are not usually a sign of a serious heart problem.

What Causes Heart palpitations?

Common lifestyle triggers for heart palpitations include strenuous exercise, lack of sleep, caffeine-containing drinks such as coffee, tea, cola and energy drinks, spicy foods, alcohol, smoking and recreational drugs. Palpitations often improve once the trigger has passed, and avoiding known triggers may help prevent them from happening again.

Stress and Emotions

Heart palpitations can occur during periods of stress, anxiety, nervousness or excitement, and may also happen during panic attacks. Relaxation techniques, breathing exercises and taking steps to manage stress may help reduce these symptoms.

Medicines

Some medicines may cause palpitations, including certain asthma inhalers, blood pressure medicines, antihistamines, antibiotics, antidepressants and antifungal medicines. If you think a medicine is causing your symptoms, speak to your GP or pharmacist. Do not stop taking prescribed medication unless a healthcare professional advises you to.

Hormonal Changes

Some people experience palpitations during their menstrual period, pregnancy or the menopause. These palpitations are usually temporary and often improve once hormone levels stabilise.

Medical Conditions

Palpitations can sometimes be caused by an underlying medical condition, such as an overactive thyroid gland, low blood sugar, anaemia, a sudden drop in blood pressure when standing, a fever or infection, or dehydration.

Heart Rhythm Problems

Occasionally, palpitations are caused by an abnormal heart rhythm, known as an arrhythmia, such as

atrial fibrillation, atrial flutter, supraventricular tachycardia (SVT) or ventricular tachycardia.

Other Heart Conditions

Less commonly, palpitations may be linked to heart valve problems, thickening of the heart muscle (cardiomyopathy), heart failure or congenital heart disease, which means a heart condition that has been present since birth.

Looking After Yourself

To help manage palpitations, try reducing your caffeine and alcohol intake, stopping smoking, avoid recreational drugs, getting adequate sleep, drinking plenty of fluids and managing stress or anxiety. It may also be helpful to keep a record of when your symptoms occur and any possible triggers.

When Should I Seek Emergency Help?

Call 999 or attend your nearest Emergency Department immediately if you experience palpitations together with any of the following:

- Chest pain or tightness
- Severe shortness of breath
- Dizziness or feeling faint
- Loss of consciousness (fainting or blackouts)

These symptoms may indicate a serious heart condition and require urgent medical assessment.

Further Information

For more information about heart palpitations, visit:

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/heart-palpitations>

<https://www.bhf.org.uk/informationsupport/conditions/palpitations>

Contacting the team

If you have any questions about your care during your visit, please speak to a member of the nursing or reception team.

If you would like this leaflet in another language or format, or you would like to give feedback on your care, please contact our patient experience team on paht.pals@nhs.net