



# What Is an Arrhythmia?

An arrhythmia is an abnormal heart rhythm. It may feel like fluttering or a brief pause. Some people may feel nothing at all. It could be so brief that it doesn't change your heart rate (the number of times per minute that your heart beats). Or it can cause the heart rate to be too slow or too fast.

An electrical impulse in your heart starts each heartbeat. Abnormal heart rhythms happen when those impulses don't fire at the right time.

Some abnormal heart rhythms don't cause any symptoms. Others can mean your heart isn't pumping enough blood to your body, which can make you feel lightheaded or dizzy.

The two basic kinds of abnormal heart rhythms are:

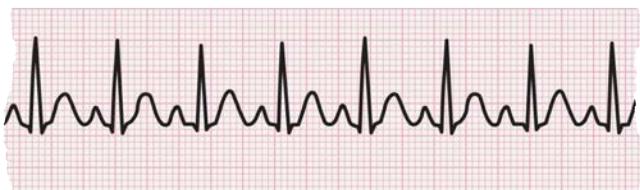
- **Bradycardia** is when the heart rate is too slow — less than 60 beats per minute.
- **Tachycardia** is when the heart rate is too fast — more than 100 beats per minute.



ECG strip showing a **normal heartbeat**



ECG strip showing **bradycardia**



ECG strip showing **tachycardia**

## What are the signs of an 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 may also feel like a fluttering in the chest or neck.
- When abnormal heart rhythms 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, lightheaded or may make you pass out. It can also cause death.
- Bradycardia can cause fatigue, dizziness, lightheadedness, fainting or near-fainting spells. In extreme cases, it can cause cardiac arrest.
- 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.

## How are arrhythmias diagnosed?

Before treatment, it's important for your health care team to know where an arrhythmia starts in your heart and whether it's abnormal. An electrocardiogram (EKG) is often used to diagnose an abnormal heart rhythm. It's a quick and painless test. It creates a graphic record of the heart's electrical impulses.

You may be asked to wear a Holter monitor. It's a battery-operated portable device that measures and records your heart's activity for 24 to 48 hours.

Other tests used to detect an abnormal heart rhythm include:

- Exercise stress test
- Tilt table test
- Electrophysiology study
- Computed tomography (CT) scans
- Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI)

Your health care team will decide which tests are needed based on your symptoms.

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### How are arrhythmias treated?

Treatment may include:

- Lifestyle changes
- Medication to prevent and control abnormal heart rhythms
- Medication to treat related conditions, such as high blood pressure, coronary artery disease and heart failure
- Medication to reduce the risk of blood clots and stroke
- Medical devices, such as a pacemaker or implanted cardioverter defibrillator (ICD), to help your heart beat more regularly
- Surgery, such as a cardiac ablation

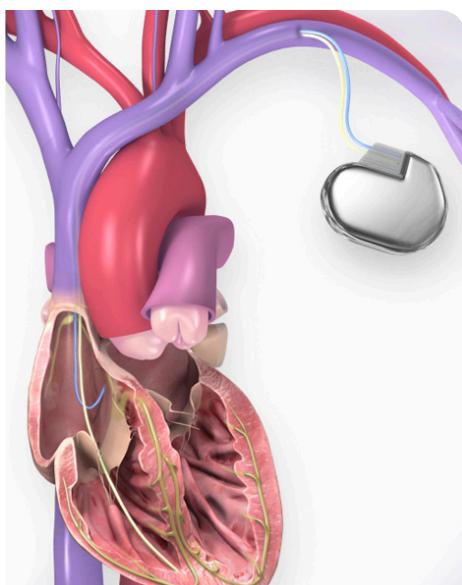
### What is defibrillation?

Defibrillation uses a brief electric shock to return an abnormal heartbeat to normal.

An ICD may be placed under the skin of your upper chest. It can sense when your heartbeat isn't normal and deliver shocks to restore your heart's normal rhythm. ICDs work 24 hours a day.

### What is ablation?

An ablation is a minor surgery that fixes an abnormal heart rhythm, such as an arrhythmia or atrial fibrillation. During this procedure, a thin tube (catheter) is inserted into a vein in your groin or wrist and guided to your heart. The tip of the catheter delivers a burst of energy that destroys the very small areas of heart tissue that are causing the abnormal electrical signals.



An ICD is implanted under the skin, just under the collarbone. It detects abnormal heart rhythms and responds with electrical signals to restore your heart's normal rhythm.

## HOW CAN I LEARN MORE?

- 1 Call 1-800-AHA-USA1 (1-800-242-8721) or visit [heart.org](http://heart.org) to learn more about heart disease and stroke.
- 2 Sign up for our monthly *Heart Insight* e-news for heart patients and their families at [HeartInsight.org](http://HeartInsight.org).
- 3 Connect with others sharing similar journeys with heart disease and stroke by joining our Support Network at [SupportNetwork.heart.org](http://SupportNetwork.heart.org).

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

Take a few minutes to write down questions for the next time you see your health care professional.

For example:

**Can my abnormal heart rhythm be cured?**

**Will I have to keep taking medication?**

### MY QUESTIONS:

We have many other fact sheets to help you make healthier choices to reduce your risk of heart disease, manage your condition or care for a loved one. Visit [heart.org/AnswersByHeart](http://heart.org/AnswersByHeart) to learn more.