



DANA-FARBER/BRIGHAM AND WOMEN'S CANCER CENTER

Heart palpitations

Understanding palpitations

Heart palpitations are the uncomfortable sensation that your heart is beating fast or irregularly. You might feel pounding or fluttering in your chest. It might feel like your heart is skipping a beat.

Although palpitations may be caused by a heart problem, they also occur because of stress, fatigue, or use of alcohol, caffeine, or nicotine. Many medicines, including diet pills, antihistamines, decongestants, and some herbal products, can cause heart palpitations. Nearly everyone has palpitations from time to time.

How can you care for yourself at home?

- Avoid caffeine, nicotine, excess alcohol and illegal drugs.
- Do not take weight loss or diet medicines unless you talk with your doctor first.
- Get plenty of sleep.
- Keep hydrated.
- If you have palpitations again, take deep breaths and try to relax. This may slow a racing heart.
- If you start to feel lightheaded, lie down to avoid injuries that might result if you pass out and fall down.
- Take your medicines exactly as prescribed. Call your doctor if you think you are having a problem with your medicine.
- Keep a record of your palpitations and bring it to your next doctor's appointment. Write down:
 - The date and time.
 - Your pulse. (If your heart is beating fast, it may be hard to count your pulse.)
 - What you were doing when the palpitations started.
 - How long the palpitations lasted.
 - Any other symptoms.

When should you call for help?

Call your doctor if:

Your palpitations are occurring more frequently

You are taking medications for your heart rhythm and have questions about them

You notice other symptoms such as mild leg swelling or mild shortness of breath

Call 911 anytime you think you may need emergency care. For example, call if:

- You passed out (lost consciousness) or feel lightheaded or dizzy like you might pass out
- You have chest pain or shortness of breath
- A sudden, severe headache that is different from past headaches.