



British Heart
Foundation

Palpitations & ectopic beats

What are palpitations?

The term 'palpitations' is used to describe the sensation of feeling your own heart beating. Some say this feels like a fluttering in your chest, or your heart pounding. Others describe it as feeling like a thud or movement in your chest, which you can feel in your neck or through your ear when you are lying down. Palpitations can be felt whether your heart is beating normally, quickly, slowly or irregularly.

Palpitations are very common and for most people are harmless

However, they can be a nuisance and feel very unpleasant at times. They often happen when you have over exerted yourself, for example through vigorous exercise, or when you are feeling particularly anxious or stressed.

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What are ectopic beats?

Ectopic beats are early (premature) or extra heartbeats, which can cause you to have palpitations. 'Ectopic' means out of place. Ectopic beats happen when cells away from your heart's own natural pacemaker get a little excited (or irritable) and release an electrical signal, causing an 'extra' or early heartbeat. There is often a tiny pause after the extra beat, giving you the sensation of a 'missed' beat.

The two most common types of ectopic beats are:

- premature atrial contraction (PAC) - an early electrical impulse in the atria, which are the upper chambers of your heart
- premature ventricular contraction (PVC) - an early electrical impulse in the ventricles, which are the lower chambers of your heart.

Like most causes of palpitations, ectopic beats are usually harmless and do not mean you have a serious heart condition. They generally require no treatment unless they occur very often or are very severe.

What causes them?

Palpitations and ectopic beats are usually nothing to worry about. The cause is often unknown - or 'idiopathic'. However, you are more likely to feel palpitations if you have a heart condition, such as an abnormal heart rhythm (arrhythmia). They can also be caused by a chemical imbalance in your body such as a low blood potassium level, or injury to the heart muscle such as a heart attack.

Stimulants such as these can trigger palpitations:

- alcohol
- caffeine
- certain medicines (both prescription and over-the-counter)
- recreational drugs
- tobacco.

You are also more likely to develop palpitations or ectopic beats if you are pregnant, or going through the menopause as a result of hormonal changes

Heart Helpline

Our cardiac nurses and Information Support Officers' are here to answer your questions about anything heart related.

Call us on 0300 330 3311

Similar cost to 01 or 02 numbers.
Lines are open 9am - 5pm Monday to Friday.

This information does not replace the advice that your doctor or nurse may give you. If you are worried about your heart health in any way, contact your GP or local healthcare provider.

What tests will I need?

If you're concerned about palpitations, go and see your GP. He or she may arrange for you to have an electrocardiogram (ECG) to check your heart rate and rhythm. If your ECG is abnormal or your symptoms continue to bother you, you may need to have further tests, such as a 24-72-hour ECG.

Will I need treatment?

Whether or not you need treatment will depend on the underlying cause of your palpitations, and how severe your symptoms are. Avoiding the triggers of palpitations and ectopic beats may help. Medicines, such as beta blockers, may be prescribed to lower your heart rate and control your heart rhythm.

In more serious cases you may be referred to a specialist, especially if you already have heart disease or your doctor thinks you may have a heart condition.