

# Palpitations

Section 1 of 6: What are palpitations?

Understand racing, fluttering, or skipped beats, possible causes, testing, and next steps.

## What should I do now?

### Call 911

Call 911 for new or unexplained chest pressure that persists or returns, severe trouble breathing, collapse without normal recovery, or sudden face/arm weakness or trouble speaking. Do not drive yourself.

### Contact your care team

Contact your care team for new, longer, or more frequent episodes, or reduced activity.

### Keep your care plan

Record timing, duration, and symptoms when safe; save any available EKG recording.

#### SECTION 1

## What are palpitations?

Palpitations are the sensation of noticing your heartbeat more than usual. Your heart may feel as though it is racing, fluttering, pounding, skipping a beat, or beating unevenly. You may notice this in your chest, throat, or neck, during activity or while resting.

### What can palpitations feel like?

- Racing: Your heart suddenly feels faster than usual.

- Fluttering: A rapid, trembling sensation in your chest.
- Pounding: Heartbeats that feel unusually strong or forceful.
- Skipped beats: A brief pause followed by a stronger thump.
- Irregular beats: A heartbeat that feels uneven or unpredictable.

Episodes may last a few seconds, several minutes, or longer. They may happen occasionally or repeatedly.

## **A symptom, not a diagnosis**

Palpitations describe what you feel. They do not tell us which heart rhythm is present. You may feel a normal heartbeat, an extra beat, or an abnormal rhythm. An EKG or heart monitor can help identify what is happening.

## **Why does it feel like my heart skipped a beat?**

Sometimes an early beat is followed by a brief pause and a stronger heartbeat. This can feel like a skipped beat even though your heart actually had an extra beat. PACs and PVCs are common examples.

## **Are palpitations always dangerous?**

Many palpitations are harmless. However, new, recurring, worsening, or prolonged symptoms should be evaluated, especially if you have known heart disease.

Call 911 if palpitations occur with chest pain, fainting, severe shortness of breath, or severe dizziness. Do not drive yourself.

# Palpitations

## Section 2 of 6: Possible causes

Understand racing, fluttering, or skipped beats, possible causes, testing, and next steps.

### SECTION 2

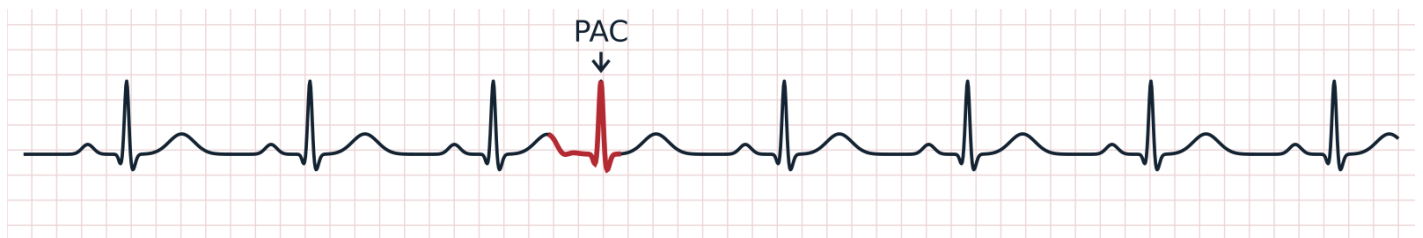
## What can cause palpitations?

Palpitations have many possible causes. They may come from extra beats, an abnormal rhythm, or a normal heartbeat responding to something happening in your body.

### 1. Extra beats or abnormal heart rhythms

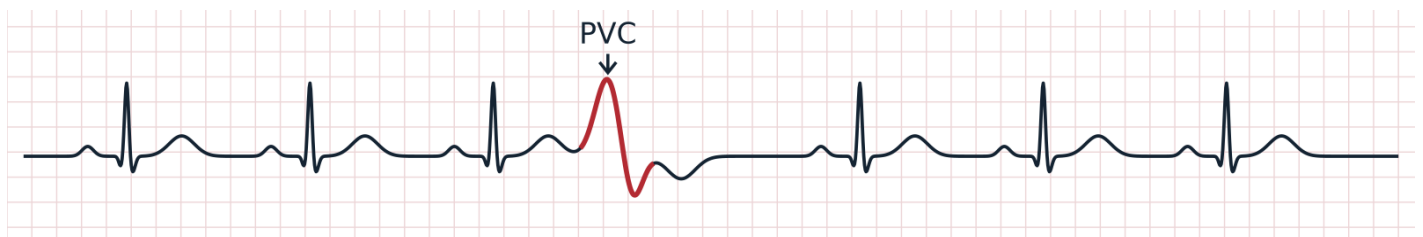
Palpitations may come from early beats or an abnormal heart rhythm. These examples show how different rhythms can look on an EKG.

#### PAC - premature atrial contraction



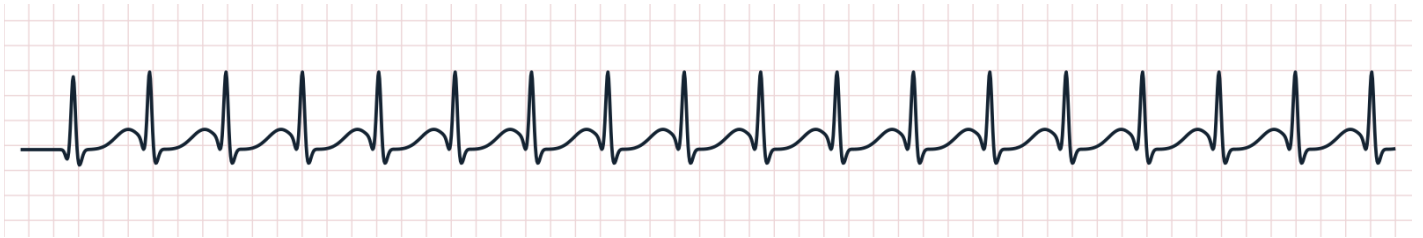
An early beat starts in an upper chamber. It may feel like a skip, flutter, or thump.

#### PVC - premature ventricular contraction



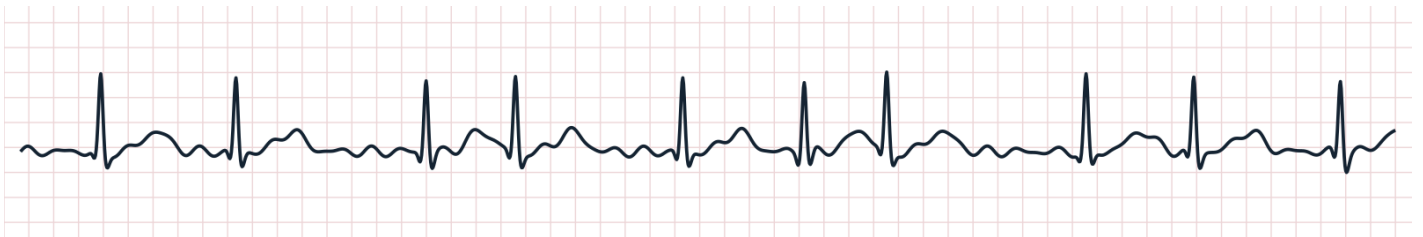
An early beat starts in a lower chamber. The early beat and the pause afterward may feel like a skipped beat followed by a stronger thump.

## SVT - supraventricular tachycardia



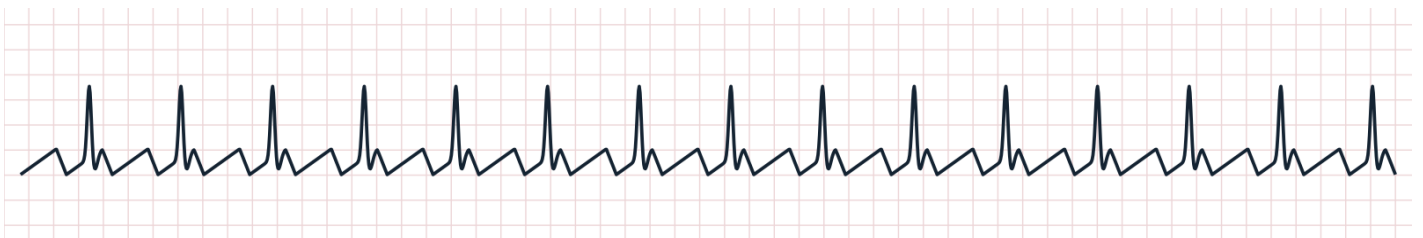
A fast rhythm that often starts and stops suddenly. This example shows a regular, rapid heartbeat.

## Atrial fibrillation - AFib



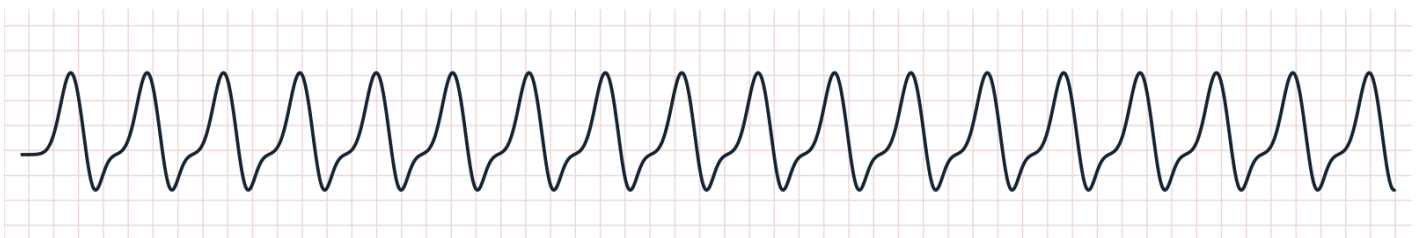
The heartbeat is irregular. There is no consistent pattern of normal upper-chamber electrical waves.

## Atrial flutter



This typical flutter example shows repeated flutter waves between beats. Flutter can produce a regular or irregular pulse.

## Ventricular tachycardia - VT



A fast rhythm starts in a lower chamber. This rhythm requires prompt medical assessment.

How the heartbeat feels does not reliably identify the rhythm. Recording it during symptoms helps determine the cause.

Illustrative examples, not patient recordings. Each strip represents approximately six seconds; display size is not calibrated. Actual EKGs vary and require clinical interpretation.

## **2. Everyday triggers**

Some people notice palpitations with:

- Stress or anxiety
- Exercise
- Caffeine or energy drinks
- Alcohol
- Nicotine
- Dehydration

Triggers vary from person to person. Keeping a record of when symptoms happen can help identify a pattern.

## **3. Other medical conditions**

Examples include:

- Anemia: Too few healthy red blood cells.
- Thyroid problems: Especially an overactive thyroid.
- Fever or illness.
- Low blood sugar.
- Electrolyte abnormalities: Changes in minerals such as potassium.
- Hormonal changes during pregnancy or menopause.

## **4. Medications and supplements**

Some cold medicines, inhalers, stimulant medications, and supplements can cause palpitations.

Bring a complete list of prescription medicines, over-the-counter products, and supplements to your appointment. Discuss any changes with your clinician before stopping a prescribed medication.

### **Could it just be anxiety?**

Anxiety can cause palpitations, and palpitations can make you feel anxious. Both may occur together.

New or recurring symptoms should be evaluated rather than automatically attributed to anxiety. Identifying the cause helps us choose the right treatment.

# Palpitations

Section 3 of 6: When to seek help

Understand racing, fluttering, or skipped beats, possible causes, testing, and next steps.

## SECTION 3

### When should I seek medical help?

Many palpitations are harmless, but the symptoms that occur with them help determine how urgently you need care.

#### Call 911 for warning signs

Seek emergency care if palpitations occur with:

- Chest pain, pressure, or discomfort.
- Fainting or loss of consciousness.
- Severe shortness of breath.
- Severe dizziness or feeling that you may pass out.

Do not drive yourself or delay care while trying to record your rhythm on a watch.

#### When should I contact my doctor?

Arrange an evaluation if your palpitations are new, keep returning, become more frequent, or last longer than before. This is especially important if you have known heart disease.

If your heart remains unusually fast at rest and the episode is not settling, seek prompt medical advice. Warning signs listed above require emergency care.

## What should I record?

If you feel well enough, note:

- When the episode started and how long it lasted.
- Whether it began and stopped suddenly.
- Whether the pulse felt regular or uneven.
- What you were doing when it started.
- Any associated symptoms.
- Your heart rate or a watch EKG recording, if available.

Bring this information to your appointment. It can help your doctor connect your symptoms with a heart rhythm. Feeling better between episodes does not tell us what rhythm occurred during them.

# Palpitations

Section 4 of 6: Evaluation

Understand racing, fluttering, or skipped beats, possible causes, testing, and next steps.

## SECTION 4

### How are palpitations evaluated?

The goal is to find out what your heart is doing when you feel symptoms. Your doctor will review your symptoms, medical history, medications, and possible triggers, then examine you and select appropriate tests.

#### 1. An EKG: a snapshot of your rhythm

An electrocardiogram, called an EKG or ECG, records your heart's electrical activity through sticky patches placed on your skin. It is quick and painless.

An EKG may identify an abnormal rhythm if it is happening during the recording. A normal office EKG does not rule out a rhythm problem that comes and goes.



An EKG records your heart's electrical activity through electrodes placed on your skin.

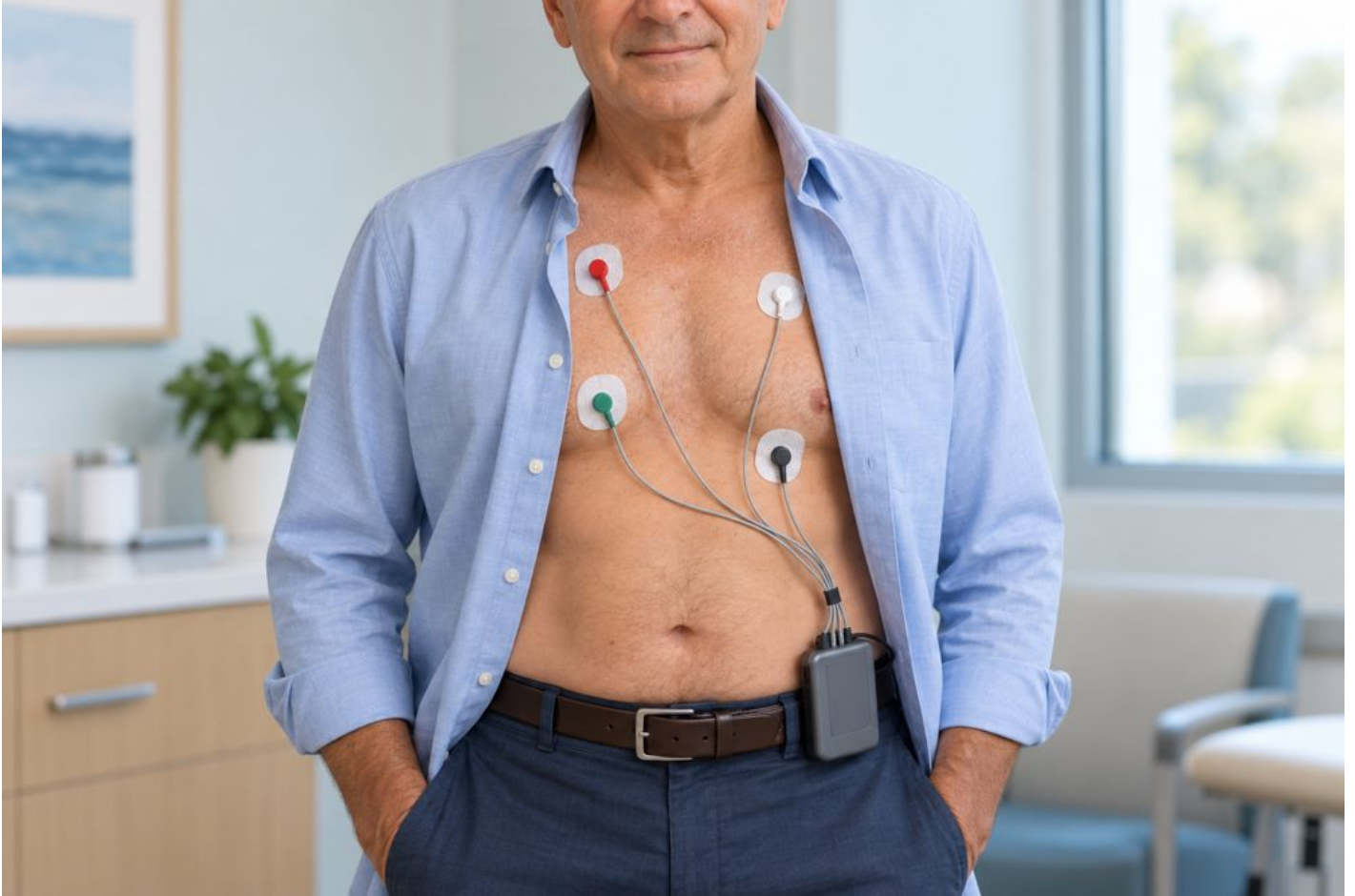
## 2. A heart monitor: a longer recording

If symptoms happen outside the office, your doctor may recommend:

- A Holter or patch monitor: Records your rhythm during everyday activities over one or more days.
- An event monitor: Used for longer monitoring when episodes happen less frequently.
- An implantable loop recorder: A small monitor placed under the skin for selected patients who need long-term monitoring, especially when unexplained episodes are infrequent.

The best monitor depends on how often your symptoms occur. Follow instructions for marking symptoms and keeping a diary so we can

compare what you felt with the recorded rhythm.



A Holter monitor records your rhythm during daily activities, helping identify rhythm changes that come and go.

### **3. Blood tests**

Your doctor may check for conditions that can contribute to palpitations, such as thyroid problems or abnormal levels of potassium and other electrolytes.

### **4. An echocardiogram**

An echocardiogram, or echo, uses ultrasound to examine your heart's structure, pumping function, and valves. It helps look for underlying heart problems; it does not replace an EKG or rhythm monitor.



An echocardiogram uses an ultrasound probe on your chest to look at your heart's structure and function.

## 5. Additional testing when needed

Some patients may need a stress test to assess their heart during exercise. Selected patients may need an electrophysiology study, which examines the heart's electrical system from inside the heart. These tests are chosen based on your symptoms and initial findings.

Not everyone needs every test. Your evaluation should match your symptoms and medical history.

# Palpitations

Section 5 of 6: What can help

Understand racing, fluttering, or skipped beats, possible causes, testing, and next steps.

## SECTION 5

### What can help palpitations?

Treatment depends on what is causing your symptoms. Some patients need reassurance and changes to everyday habits. Others need treatment for an underlying condition or a specific heart rhythm.

#### 1. Identify your triggers

Keep track of whether episodes follow caffeine, energy drinks, alcohol, nicotine, stress, or certain medications.

If you notice a pattern, reducing that trigger may help. Relaxation techniques, such as slow breathing, can also help manage stress. Triggers vary from person to person.

#### 2. Treat an underlying medical problem

If palpitations are related to a thyroid disorder, an electrolyte imbalance, or another medical condition, treating that problem may improve symptoms.

Review your medications and supplements with your clinician. Do not stop prescribed medication or take potassium supplements on your own.

#### 3. Treat the rhythm when needed

If testing identifies an abnormal rhythm, treatment may include:

- Observation: Some rhythms do not require medication or a procedure.

- Medication: To slow the heart rate or reduce abnormal rhythm episodes.
- Catheter ablation: For selected rhythms, a procedure that targets the tissue causing or supporting the abnormal electrical activity.

Your treatment depends on the rhythm, how much it affects you, and whether it poses a risk to your heart. An electrophysiologist - a cardiologist specializing in heart rhythms - can help determine which options fit your situation.

## **4. Know what to do during an episode**

Stop your activity and sit down if you feel lightheaded. If you feel well enough, note when the episode started and capture a rhythm recording if available.

Follow any specific instructions your doctor has given you. Call 911 for chest pain, fainting, severe shortness of breath, or severe dizziness. Do not delay emergency care to record your rhythm.

The goal is to understand the cause, reduce symptoms, and treat any rhythm that could affect your health.

# Palpitations

Section 6 of 6: Your appointment

Understand racing, fluttering, or skipped beats, possible causes, testing, and next steps.

## SECTION 6

### Preparing for your appointment

Your description of an episode can help us understand your palpitations - even if your heartbeat feels normal during the visit.

#### What should I bring?

- A symptom diary: When episodes happen, how long they last, and whether they start and stop suddenly.
- Associated symptoms: Chest discomfort, shortness of breath, dizziness, or fainting.
- Possible triggers: Activity, stress, caffeine, alcohol, or a recent medication change.
- A complete medication list: Include doses, over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, and supplements.
- Relevant family history: Heart rhythm problems, heart disease, or unexplained sudden death.

Bring any available watch EKG recordings, heart-rate logs, or previous heart-test results.

#### Questions to ask your doctor

- What might be causing my palpitations?
- Do we know which rhythm is happening during my symptoms?

- Do I need a heart monitor, and for how long?
- Do I need treatment or further testing?
- Should I see an electrophysiologist?
- Are there activities or triggers I should avoid?
- What should I do if another episode occurs?
- When will we review my results?

## **Leave with a clear plan**

Before leaving, make sure you understand your next steps: which tests are planned, how you will receive the results, and when to follow up.

If palpitations occur with chest pain, fainting, severe shortness of breath, or severe dizziness, call 911 rather than waiting for your appointment.

## **Sources & further reading**

NIH: Rhythm testing

NIH: Arrhythmia treatment

Mayo Clinic: Palpitations and warning signs

Mayo Clinic: Evaluation and appointment preparation

Updated October 2026. Educational information; your own care plan may differ. Medical illustrations are simplified examples for teaching.