

Diagnosing Irregular Heart Rhythms

Understanding what irregular heart rhythms are and how they are diagnosed can be reassuring, whether you are in the hospital or at home.

The heart is a muscle that pumps oxygen-rich blood throughout the body. In a healthy heart, the four chambers of the heart work in rhythm together.

Certain types of irregular heart rhythms may interfere with the normal heartbeat or change it. This may throw the timing of the heart off.

Two types of irregular heart rhythms are atrial fibrillation and ventricular fibrillation.

Atrial fibrillation is when your top two chambers, called the atria, beat irregularly or fibrillate. This means blood can't move to the lower chambers of the heart as well as it should.

Ventricular fibrillation is when the lower chambers, called the ventricles, shake or quiver and don't push the blood to your body effectively. Ventricular fibrillation is life threatening and is an emergency.

Symptoms of irregular heartbeat include: a feeling that your heart is beating too fast; a feeling like your heart has skipped a beat; a fluttering in your chest or neck; some people do not have symptoms at all with atrial fibrillation.

If the irregular heartbeat continues you may experience weakness or fatigue; you may pass out or faint; have shortness of breath; increased pulse rate; chest discomfort, pain or pressure; and dizziness.

These symptoms may be serious. Call 911 if you are able or yell out for help. Do not drive yourself to the hospital.

When you arrive at the hospital your healthcare provider will check your heart to make sure it's pumping correctly.

An electrocardiogram, commonly referred to as an EKG or ECG, is the most common test used.

This test measures the electrical impulses in your heart to see if they are normal or irregular.

An ECG is painless and there is no risk involved.

Some arrhythmias occur during activity.

Your healthcare professional may order an exercise stress test to see if you have problems during exercise.

During an exercise stress test you will be placed on a heart monitor while you walk on a treadmill.

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In some cases you might be given a portable ECG device, called a Holter Monitor, to wear for a few days. This will give your healthcare provider more information about any irregular beats during your normal routine.

“The cardiologist, so he put me on a monitor for a couple of days just to find out if it was, if I was in and out or if there was any pattern to going in and out of a fib, and then they quickly discovered that there was a pattern.”

Another test to evaluate your heart is called an Echocardiogram.

This test uses ultrasound waves that show a picture of the heart at work, including how much blood is being pumped with every beat.

“There's a second tier of testing that involves an echocardiogram or ultrasound of the heart in which tells us something about the heart function does it pump normally, does it relax normally, are the valves opening appropriately... are there narrowing of the valves or leaking of the valves...”

If these tests show that you have an irregular heart rhythm your healthcare provider will work with you to develop a treatment plan.