

Signs and Symptoms

Some abnormal heart rhythms can happen without the person knowing it, while some may cause a feeling of the heart “racing,” lightheadedness, or dizziness.

At some point in life, many adults have had short-lived heart rhythm changes that are not serious.

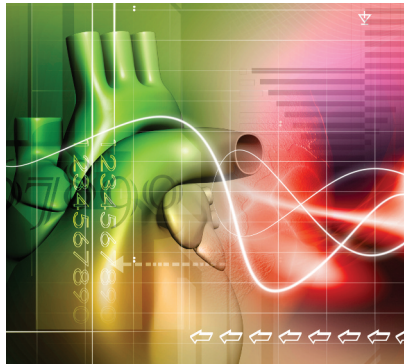
Certain heart rhythms, especially those that last long enough to affect the heart’s function, can be serious or even deadly.

Palpitation or Skipped Beat

Although it may seem as if the heart missed a beat, it has really had an early heartbeat — an extra beat that happens before the heart has a chance to fill with blood. Therefore the squeeze is empty and results in a pause.

Fluttering

A fluttering sensation (like butterflies in the chest) is usually due to extra or “skipped beats” that occur one right after the other, or may be caused by other kinds of abnormal heart rhythms.



Slow Heartbeat – Bradycardia

If the heartbeat is too slow (usually below 60 beats per minute), not enough blood carrying oxygen flows through the body. The symptoms of a slow heartbeat are:

- Fatigue (feeling tired)*
- Dizziness*
- Lightheadedness*
- Fainting or near fainting*

Rapid Heartbeat – Tachycardia

When the heart beats too quickly (usually above 100 beats per minute), the lower chambers, or ventricles, do not have enough time to fill with blood, so they cannot effectively pump blood to the rest of the body. When this happens, some people have symptoms such as:

- Skipping a beat*
- Beating out of rhythm*
- Palpitations*
- Fast or racing heartbeat*
- Shortness of breath*
- Chest pain*
- Dizziness*
- Lightheadedness*
- Fainting or near fainting*

Bradycardia is a slow heartbeat of below **60** beats per minute, which can be normal.

Chaotic, quivering, or irregular rhythm

Sudden rapid, irregular, and chaotic heartbeats may be a sign of a common heart rhythm problem called atrial fibrillation (AFib). In rare cases, passing out or fainting may be caused by the most dangerous arrhythmia, ventricular fibrillation (VF). VF is the number one cause of sudden cardiac death. Within seconds, the person loses consciousness and, without immediate emergency treatment, will die within minutes.

Almost Fainting – Presyncope

Sometimes people have symptoms before they faint. Presyncope can be a sign of a heart rhythm disorder and should be evaluated carefully. Symptoms include:

Dizziness, lightheadedness, or vertigo (spinning)

Blurred or narrowed (tunnel) vision

Sweating

Nausea (feeling sick to one's stomach) and/or vomiting

Stomach ache/abdominal discomfort

Heart palpitations

Headache

Confusion and/or difficulty speaking clearly or coherently (not making any sense)

Fainting – Syncope

Fainting from a heart rhythm disorder is more likely to happen suddenly and without warning than fainting from other causes, such as dehydration or low blood sugar.

Any sudden loss of consciousness should be evaluated by a doctor.

In some cases, fainting is the only warning sign of a dangerous heart rhythm that could cause sudden cardiac death.

Electrical Signals

Every heart has an electrical system. The sinus node, often called the heart's natural pacemaker, sets the rate for the heart.

The atrioventricular (AV) node sends signals from the upper chambers (atria) to the lower chambers (ventricles).

A problem in the sinus node, AV node, or anywhere along the electrical path can interrupt the regular heartbeat and cause an arrhythmia. The heartbeat can become too fast or too slow and can be chaotic or regular. Symptoms vary based on the rhythm change.