



**Palpitations Q&A**  
*Top questions from our  
October 2009 free community seminar on palpitations.*

**Q: What is a palpitation?**

A: A palpitation is a sensation that can occur when the heart beats fast or when extra heart beats occur. It can be a pounding sensation, a flutter or the feeling that your heart is racing. Some people describe it as a "flip flop."

**Q: Should you talk to a doctor if you feel flip flops?**

A: Yes. The doctor will be able to tell if you need any testing to determine the cause and origin of the flip flops, or abnormal heart rhythm.

**Q: What tests should we ask our PCP to do?**

A: Tests that are frequently done when a person has palpitations are an EKG and blood tests to check for electrolyte abnormalities, anemia, and thyroid abnormalities. At times a 24-hour EKG, called a Holter monitor, will be hooked up to record your heart rhythm for 24 hours to try to record what your heart is doing. Sometimes a doctor may recommend a treadmill test or an ultrasound of the heart, called an Echo.

**Q: If you have palpitations with a normal EKG what do you do?**

A: An EKG only tells us what is going on in your heart for the few seconds it takes to record the tracing. If you have a palpitation at the time your EKG is being done it is helpful, but we are usually not that lucky. Frequently, a 24-hour Holter monitor is required to catch the abnormal heart rhythm. If palpitations do not occur every day, then a 30 day "event monitor" may be indicated. You can wear it for 30 days. If you have a palpitation you press a button that will record what your heart is doing at that time.

**Q: What causes palpitations?**

A: There are many reasons the heart may have an extra or abnormal rhythm. First your doctor needs to determine the type of heart irregularity you are having. Once that is discovered he/she will probably order appropriate tests to get at the cause. Sometimes palpitations can be caused too much caffeine, smoking, electrolyte abnormalities, lung diseases, thyroid problems, too much alcohol, heart disease, anemia or they may run in the family.

**Q: Are palpitations serious?**

A: There are many types of heart rhythm irregularities; most are not serious. The only way to tell for sure if your symptoms are from a serious heart rhythm disturbance is to document what the rhythm is. In general, if you do **NOT** become lightheaded, short of breath, have chest pain or faint, it may be a benign rhythm.

**Q: How do I know if I need to go to the Emergency Department?**

A: You should discuss this with your physician to get specific guidelines for you. Most physicians agree that if you are having persistent palpitations, but feel fine, you should call your doctor. If you develop shortness of breath, chest pain, break out in a cold sweat, become lightheaded or faint, you need to call 911.

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