

Palpitations (Ectopic beats)

What is it:

Palpitations are an uncomfortable awareness of the heart beat. Sometimes they feel like a missed beat or a thump that can be widely felt in the chest, throat or ears.

What Causes it:

For the heart to work as an efficient Pump it must beat in an orderly sequence with the collecting chamber (atrium) contracting before the pumping chamber (ventricle). To achieve this the heart normally follows a rhythm or beat which begins in the atrium. Even though palpitations often produce a feeling that the heart has missed a beat, they are usually caused by extra beats produced when the heart is overactive. The extra beat occurs earlier than the expected normal beat. This is too early for the heart to have **filled** fully and may be felt as a weak beat. It does however suppress the next expected normal beat leading to a pause before the next beat is felt. During this longer than expected delay the heart fills up more than usual producing a very strong beat which is felt as a thump.

What are the risks:

Palpitations, in the absence of underlying heart disease are usually quite safe. Even though the heart feels like it missed a beat it has not. The feeling can be quite uncomfortable but is unlikely to cause any major problem. It is rare for palpitations to cause dizziness or collapse.

How do you treat it:

The main treatment is avoidance of factors, which trigger over-activity of the heart rhythm. The commonest of these is caffeine in strong coffee, or when lots of cups of coffee or tea are drunk. Caffeine is also present in cola drinks and chocolate. Other causes include smoking, tiredness, periods of stress and other illnesses such as fevers. Occasionally tablets are required. These are usually low dose beta blockers (Betaloc, Tenormin, Niten) that are used for a short period of time until the precipitant has been removed.

Ectopics are common and generally quite safe requiring no treatment.

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