



## Top 10 Things You Should Know About Heart Rhythm

At Scripps Health, we know that when it comes to your heart, experience matters. And our board-certified cardiac electrophysiologists diagnose and treat more patients with abnormal heart rhythms than any other health care provider in San Diego. Recognized as leaders for their groundbreaking research, our renowned electrophysiologists are continually looking for new and better ways to manage and treat heart rhythm disorders; ensuring Scripps patients have access to the most advanced technology. Throughout the Scripps cardiovascular network, electrophysiologists work hand-in-hand with your primary care physician, cardiologist and medical colleagues to provide the best possible treatment options for all types of arrhythmias.

If you or a loved one has been diagnosed with an abnormal heart rhythm (arrhythmia), this guide will help you better understand arrhythmia, including what can be done to manage and even cure the condition.

### **What is a Normal Heart Rhythm?**

Normally, the heart beats in a regular rhythm and at a rate that is appropriate for the work the body is doing. The electrical system of your heart initiates each heartbeat and creates signals that trigger the heart to pump. These electrical signals control the heart rate and rhythm. A normal heartbeat has a specific pattern of electrical flow throughout the heart.

# When Your Heart Rhythm Isn't Normal

1. Heart rhythm problems are called arrhythmias and result from a problem in the electrical system of the heart. An arrhythmia refers to an abnormal heart rate or any change from your normal heart beat or a change from your normal regular heart beat pattern.
  - A fast heart rate (in adults, more than 100 beats per minute) is called tachycardia.
  - A slow heart rate (less than 60 beats per minute) is referred to as bradycardia.
2. Approximately one in 18 people, or 5 percent of the U.S. population has an arrhythmia. A recent study has also suggested that one in four adult Americans over the age of 40 could develop an irregular heartbeat.
3. Arrhythmias can affect anyone — even people who are otherwise healthy and free of other forms of heart disease. Things that can cause the heart to beat abnormally include heavy smoking, alcohol use, excess caffeine or other stimulants, stress, thyroid disease, and fever. Expected changes in heart rate also occur during physical activity, stress or excitement, and sleep.
4. Arrhythmias can cause a few types of symptoms. These symptoms happen because the heart is not beating regularly or may not be pumping blood as well as it normally would. Symptoms include:
  - A sensation of feeling one's own heart beat (palpitations)
  - Fainting
  - Light-headedness, dizziness
  - Chest pain
  - Shortness of breath
  - Paleness
  - Temporarily inability to breathe
5. Arrhythmias may be completely harmless or they can be life-threatening. Some arrhythmias are very brief and don't affect your overall heart rhythm. But if arrhythmias last longer, they may cause your heart rate to be too slow or too fast or erratic, causing the heart to pump less effectively.
6. Atrial fibrillation, or "afib," is the most common type of abnormal heart rhythm. Although about 2 million Americans have it, atrial fibrillation is not the same for everyone. If you have afib, the upper chambers of your heart beat in a rapid and disorganized way, called fibrillating. What is unique to afib is that symptoms can range from mild to severe, and treatment can range from minimal lifestyle changes to open heart surgery.
7. Age and gender come into play in developing afib. Men are slightly more likely than women to develop afib, but women diagnosed with it carry a longer-term risk of premature death. Older people are somewhat more likely to have afib than younger people. In fact, by the time you reach 80, you have about a 10 to 15 percent chance of having it. However, about half of everyone who has afib is younger than 75.



8. Atrial fibrillation increases your stroke risk. Stroke is the biggest risk of having atrial fibrillation. Fifteen percent of all strokes occur due to atrial fibrillation because blood flow in the upper chambers of the heart is sluggish and may allow a clot to form. These clots can potentially travel to the brain, causing a stroke.
9. There are a variety of treatments and therapies that will help you manage your abnormal heart rhythm. These include lifestyle modifications, medications, ablation, open heart surgery and pacemaker implantations. Scripps cardiac specialists will partner with you to decide on the best plan, taking into account your needs, symptoms, type of arrhythmia and the cause.
10. The key to reducing your risk for arrhythmias is to take the best possible care of your heart. You can do this by managing your existing health conditions, following a healthy lifestyle and avoiding substances that can trigger arrhythmias.

## Risk Factors and Arrhythmia Triggers

Each of the following risk factors can increase your chances of developing a heart problem that can lead to an arrhythmia:

- Coronary artery disease
- High blood pressure
- Diabetes
- High cholesterol
- Obesity
- Drug abuse
- Stress
- Smoking
- Advancing age
- Sleep apnea
- Excessive caffeine/alcohol
- Family history of heart disease
- Heart failure/Congestive heart failure
- Certain medications, dietary supplements and herbal remedies

## Contact Us

For a referral to a Scripps cardiac specialist who can help you manage your abnormal heart rhythm, call **858-914-2581**. Visit [scripps.org/EPDoctors](https://scripps.org/EPDoctors) to learn more about Scripps electrophysiologists.