

The Different Types of Cardiac Arrhythmia

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Your heart might skip a beat at a suspenseful movie, or race when you're about to do something exciting. But if your heart rhythm is routinely off the beat, or if you experience palpitations frequently, you may have a condition called cardiac arrhythmia.

There are several different types of arrhythmia, and if you have one, don't just ignore it and hope it goes away.

Cardiac arrhythmia increases your risk of developing serious health problems and in some cases may even be life-threatening. A Cardiologist can help you manage this condition and reduce your risk of long-term complications. Here's what you need to know.

What is Cardiac Arrhythmia?

In a healthy heart, a regular resting heart rate is between about 60 – 100 beats per minute. Cardiac arrhythmia describes any situation where the heart's rhythm is irregular, or results in a heartbeat that is too fast or too slow.

A heartbeat that is too fast is called *tachyarrhythmia*, and a heartbeat that's too slow is called *bradyarrhythmia*.

Bradyarrhythmia is treated with a pacemaker, a small device surgically placed under the skin that helps the heart beat in a regular rhythm. At WWMG, pacemakers with conduction system pacing can improve patients' longevity.

There are several different types of cardiac arrhythmia, and their presentation in patients can range from asymptomatic to sudden cardiac arrest. Let's review the various forms of cardiac arrhythmia.

Types of Arrhythmia

Atrial Fibrillation

Atrial fibrillation, often called AFib, is the most common type of cardiac arrhythmia, affecting millions of Americans. With AFib, the upper chambers of the heart don't pump in proper coordination, which results in the lower chambers not filling completely with blood or pumping enough blood back out to the lungs and body.

The most noticeable symptom of AFib is a fast, fluttering heartbeat of up to 400 or more beats per minute during episodes that become more frequent and longer lasting over time. Patients may also experience shortness of breath, fatigue, and dizziness, or may not have any symptoms at all.

Although fibrillation episodes can be painful and frightening, they are not directly life-threatening. That doesn't mean it's safe to ignore AFib, though.

Without treatment, AFib gets progressively worse. It can lead to the formation of blood clots that cause stroke, and accelerates the cardiac aging process, which increases the risk of having a serious cardiac event such as a heart attack. For atrial fibrillation, WWMG is using the latest technology – pulse field ablation – to achieve the best outcomes.

AFib symptoms can also closely resemble more serious types of arrhythmia.

Supraventricular Tachycardia

Supraventricular tachycardia, also known as SVT, is characterized by a rapid heartbeat of 150 beats per minute or more that can last between a few minutes up to a few days. Like AFib, SVT is not immediately life threatening and can even go unnoticed in some patients. But it can cause chest pain, dizziness, shortness of breath and exhaustion.

Episodes of SVT can occur at any age, including early childhood. Depending on the severity, treatment can be as simple as practicing vagal maneuvers – physical techniques that activate the vagus nerve, but may also include medications or even cardiac ablation.

When cardiac ablation is required, WWMG's Cardiologists utilize a technique that eliminates the use of live X-rays, reducing patients' radiation exposure during the ablation.

Life-Threatening Arrhythmias

Although less common than AFib, there are three types of arrhythmia that can lead to death: ventricular fibrillation, ventricular tachycardia, and asystole.

- **Ventricular Fibrillation**

Ventricular fibrillation, or VFib, is similar to AFib, in that it causes a rapid, irregular heartbeat. In this case the irregularity stems from uncoordinated contractions in the lower chambers of the heart.

But unlike AFib, VFib is immediately life-threatening. It accounts for about 70% of cardiac arrest fatalities. Episodes of VFib are often preceded by chest pain, rapid heartbeat, dizziness, and shortness of breath, but the first visible symptom may be collapse and loss of consciousness.

Because VFib is so serious, any unexplained rapid or pounding heartbeat should be treated as an emergency.

- **Ventricular Tachycardia**

Ventricular tachycardia, also called V-tach or VT, is an arrhythmia that begins in the lower chambers of the heart. Ventricular tachycardia also causes a rapid heartbeat. Although the rhythm may be more regular than VFib, the heart still may not pump enough blood out to the rest of the body.

During an episode of VT, a person will typically become lightheaded and dizzy or lose consciousness. Prolonged episodes can even cause sudden cardiac arrest, which is fatal unless treated within minutes.

- **Asystole**

Asystole is a type of cardiac arrest that occurs when the electric pulse in the heart stops completely. Without electrical pulsing, the heart fails to contract and blood stops flowing to the vital organs, causing irreversible brain damage within minutes.

Without almost immediate life support interventions, such as CPR and epinephrine, asystole usually results in death. Asystole is most commonly caused by ventricular tachycardia, but can also result from a variety of cardiac, pulmonary, or endocrine conditions.

For patients with slow heart rates, the typical treatment involves implanting a pacemaker. WWMG Cardiologists now perform conduction system pacing, which uses the heart's natural electrical system to achieve better cardiac output (blood flow) and improved longevity. For select patients, a leadless pacemaker may also be an option.

Risk Factors for Developing Arrhythmia

Cardiac arrhythmias can affect anyone regardless of age or health status. But the likelihood of a person developing arrhythmia increases with age. And patients with health conditions such as heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, or thyroid issues may also be at higher risk.

Additional risk factors for developing arrhythmia include:

- alcohol use
- use of stimulants such as caffeine
- stress
- thyroid disease, and

- fever

Changes in heart rate will naturally occur during physical activity, stress or excitement, and sleep. Outside of these situations, anyone – regardless of their presumed risk levels – should pay serious attention to heart rate changes or other symptoms of arrhythmia (mentioned above).

A heart-healthy lifestyle can help reduce your risk of developing arrhythmia.

Where to Seek Help for Cardiac Arrhythmia

If you've had or are experiencing an irregular heartbeat (too fast or too slow), contact WWMG's Cardiology department to request an appointment today. Our experienced Cardiologists will evaluate your condition and design a customized treatment plan to decrease your risk of having a stroke or cardiac arrest.

If you experience shortness of breath, chest pain, weakness, fatigue, or dizziness, call 911 or go to your nearest Emergency Room. It could save your life.

All, Cardiology

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