

Emergency Department Online

PALPITATIONS

You have been seen in the Emergency Department because of heart palpitations. This information leaflet explains what palpitations are, what causes them, what to expect, and when you should seek further medical help.

What are heart palpitations?

Heart palpitations are heartbeats that suddenly become more noticeable. You may feel that your heart is:

- Pounding
- Fluttering
- Racing
- Skipping a beat or beating irregularly

These sensations may occur in your chest, throat or neck, and are often more noticeable at night or when you are alone.

In most cases, palpitations are harmless and not a sign of a serious condition. However, in some situations, they may indicate an underlying health issue, particularly if they occur frequently or are accompanied by other symptoms.

What do they feel like?

- You may feel your heart beating faster than usual
- You may sense missed beats or extra beats (known as ectopic beats)
- You may notice an unusual sensation in your throat or neck
- Episodes might last for a few seconds to minutes, and can happen during rest or activity

When to seek emergency help

Call 999 or go to the nearest Emergency Department immediately if your palpitations are accompanied by:

- Severe shortness of breath
- Chest pain or tightness
- Dizziness or feeling faint
- Blackouts or fainting

These symptoms may indicate a serious or life-threatening problem that requires urgent assessment.

What you can do at home

- Avoid triggers like caffeine, alcohol, and lack of sleep
- Practice relaxation and breathing techniques
- Stay hydrated
- Keep a diary of your symptoms (time, duration, triggers)



Updated
March 2025

Possible causes of palpitations

Palpitations can be caused by a variety of factors. These are often grouped into: Lifestyle, Emotional, Heart-related, Other medical triggers

In many cases, identifying and avoiding these lifestyle triggers can prevent palpitations from recurring.

Lifestyle triggers

These are common and typically not dangerous. Examples include:

- Strenuous physical activity
- Lack of sleep
- Caffeine (coffee, tea, energy drinks)
- Alcohol consumption
- Smoking
- Recreational drug use (cocaine, ecstasy, amphetamines, cannabis)
- Spicy or rich foods

Emotional and psychological triggers

Strong emotions or mental health issues can affect your heart rate and rhythm:

- Excitement
- Anxiety
- Stress
- Panic attacks

Heart-related triggers

Sometimes palpitations are linked to an irregular heart rhythm, which may need further investigation:

- **Atrial fibrillation (AF)** – irregular and often fast heartbeat
- Atrial flutter
- Supraventricular tachycardia (SVT) – episodes of abnormally fast heartbeat
- Ventricular tachycardia – more serious and can cause dizziness or blackouts

During your visit to the Emergency Department, we may have done an ECG (electrocardiogram) to look for an irregular heart rhythm.

Medical triggers

Some medical conditions, medications, hormonal fluctuations and other heart conditions can also cause palpitations. These include:

- Overactive thyroid (hyperthyroidism)
- Anaemia (low red blood cell count)
- Certain medications, such as asthma inhalers, blood pressure medication and antihistamines (*do not stop taking any medication without consulting your doctor*)
- Hormonal fluctuations during menstruation, pregnancy and menopause (these are usually temporary and not a cause for concern).
- Other heart conditions: less commonly, palpitations may be caused by structural or functional issues with the heart

What tests might you have had in hospital?

To assess your symptoms, we may have done one or more of the following:

- Electrocardiogram (ECG) – a tracing of your heart rhythm
- Blood pressure and heart rate measurement
- Temperature check
- Blood tests (including to check for thyroid issues, anaemia, or electrolyte imbalances)
- Chest x-ray (if chest symptoms were present)

If needed, your GP may refer you for outpatient investigations such as:

- 24-hour ECG monitor
- Echocardiogram (heart ultrasound)
- Blood tests for thyroid or other medical conditions

When to see your GP

You **don't** usually need to see your GP if:

- Palpitations are short-lived
- They occur infrequently
- They resolve on their own and are not worsening

You should make an appointment with your GP if:

- Palpitations last a long time
- They occur frequently
- They get worse over time
- You have a history of heart problems