The Health Risks of Having an Irregular Heartbeat

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Is Irregular Heartbeat Serious?

It’s Friday afternoon, and at the end of a long work week you’re at the grocery store picking up a few last-minute items for an evening meal with your family. As you’re walking through the frozen food aisle, you suddenly feel a flutter in your chest that lasts for a few seconds.

You’re not sure what happened, and you’re wondering if you should call your doctor. What you experienced was an irregular heartbeat, which is often referred to as cardiac arrhythmia.
Cardiac arrhythmias occur when a regular sequence of electrical impulses traveling through the heart’s four chambers changes. These irregularities are quite common, and almost everyone will experience some type of arrhythmia within our lifetime. But is irregular heartbeat serious?

Many of the known cardiac arrhythmias are not severe or life-threatening and need no medical treatment. However, some originate from underlying health conditions that warrant intervention.

Types of Cardiac Arrhythmias

Before answering the question "is irregular heartbeat serious?", we must consider that there are different types of cardiac arrhythmia. An average heart rate for an adult is between 60 and 100 beats per minute (bpm). For a person with a cardiac arrhythmia, their heart rate is often slower or faster than this range, or may contract in an inconsistent pattern.

Cardiac arrhythmias occur when the heart’s internal pacing system encounters an interruption in the normal pathway in which it sends electrical signals. Cardiac arrhythmias fall into the following categories:

- Bradycardias are arrhythmias that cause heart rates lower than 60 bpm. These include sick sinus syndrome and different types of heart conduction blocks.
- Tachycardias are arrhythmias that cause heart rates faster than 100 bpm. These include atrial fibrillation (AF), atrial flutter, supraventricular tachycardia (SVT), ventricular tachycardia, and ventricular fibrillation.
- Premature beats, called premature contractions, can happen in the atria or the ventricles. These early contractions can often feel like your heart is skipping a beat, even though they are extra beats.

Potential Causes of Cardiac Arrhythmias

The causes of cardiac arrhythmias can vary depending on if they are fast or slow.

Bradycardia causes can include:

- Drug abuse
- High blood pressure

- Smoking
- Some types of medications
- A heart defect that you've had since birth
- An underactive thyroid gland
- Obstructive sleep apnea
- Changes to the structure of the heart muscle related to aging
- Damage from a previous heart attack
- Complications that arise because of heart surgery
- An infection within the tissues of the heart called myocarditis
- Inflammatory diseases such as lupus or rheumatic fever
- An imbalance of calcium or potassium in your bloodstream
- A problem with the heart's internal pacemaker
- Lyme disease
- Heart valve disease

Tachycardia causes are sometimes the same or different than those of bradycardia, such as:

- Caffeine intake
- Illicit drugs like cocaine
- Lack of blood flow to the heart
- Anemia
- Overactive thyroid gland
- Emotional distress
- Excessive alcohol consumption
- Over-exercising
- Fever
- High or low blood pressure
- Medication side effects
- Smoking
- Heart muscle injury due to a heart attack or heart failure
- A disruption in the electrical signals within your heart due to a change in the electrical pathway

If you have AF, it could have originated because of one or more of the tachycardia arrhythmia causes listed. One of the most important ways to control your AF is to know your symptoms and when to seek medical attention. For more information, be sure to speak to your physician.

AF Symptoms to Keep an Eye On

AF symptoms often vary between individuals, and some people have no symptoms at all. Others may experience one or more of the following symptoms at varying levels of intensity:

- Fatigue
- Dizziness
- Shortness of breath
- Pain or tightness in the chest that can move into the neck
- A fluttering sensation in your heart, sometimes called palpitations, that can feel like a thumping or pounding
- Weakness and feeling like you're going to faint
- Anxiety
- Confusion
- Sweating
- Significant fatigue when engaging in physical activity

AF symptoms are often identical, regardless of which type of AF you have. Many heart problems have similar warning signs, so if you experience chest pain, be sure to seek immediate medical attention.

The difference between AF and a heart attack is that AF is an electrical disturbance, and a heart attack occurs because of a blocked artery in the heart that is interrupting blood flow. The main difference in symptoms is that fluttering and palpitations generally don’t happen when an individual is experiencing a heart attack.

If you suddenly begin to experience feelings such as unusual dizziness, shortness of breath, chest pain, or weakness, call 911 and seek urgent medical care.

If the onset of AF is new, and your symptoms are mild and resolve quickly, call, and consult with your regular physician as soon as possible.

The Importance of Following Your Treatment Regimen

Your physician will design a treatment plan to manage your AF based on the type you have and other chronic health conditions that are contributing factors.

The treatment options that your physician will discuss with you are:

- Medications like blood thinners, and drugs that control heart rhythm and heart rate
- Nonsurgical interventions like electrical cardioversion or catheter ablation
- Surgical procedures such as a pacemaker or open-heart maze procedure

Your physician may also discuss clinical trials if your current health status indicates that you are a candidate.

Following your treatment plan is extremely important because it will help you to reduce the risk of developing AF complications such as:

- Heart failure
- Stroke
- Heart attack
- Cardiac arrest
- Blood clots that could develop and move to the lungs, brain, spleen, kidneys, or intestines
- Blood clots that can block a vein
- Dementia or other forms of cognitive loss

Your physicians and the other members of your healthcare team have your best interests in mind. They will work to develop a plan that is realistic and will allow you to have the best possible quality of life.

Please remember that you are an active partner in your care and be honest with your healthcare team about your opinions, concerns, and ideas for what you believe will work best for you.

So, as you can see, there is no definitive answer to the question "is irregular heartbeat serious?" It certainly can be, but it depends on the type and your individual condition and situation.