

# ARRHYTHMIAS

BY MARIA OLDHAM

## A Closer Look

### EXPERT ADVICE

#### Atrial Fibrillation

“Arrhythmias are very common in the general population; about 14 million people in the U.S. (approximately 5% of the population) have arrhythmias. Women do not appear to be more likely to develop arrhythmias than men. In fact, some arrhythmias, such as atrial fibrillation, are more common in men. Unfortunately, though, women tend to have a higher risk of death than men do when diagnosed with atrial fibrillation.”



Jennifer Ayers, DO, Cardiologist, Cardiology Services of Cleveland



A change of rhythm in the regular beat of a heart, or arrhythmia, can come in many forms. The heart can beat very slowly or quickly, beat irregularly, or seem to skip a beat. Although it can be the result of another form of heart disease, an arrhythmia can also be caused by several other factors. In fact, many people who have no present (or history of) heart disease experience arrhythmias. According to The National Coalition for Women with Heart Disease, everyday influences including tobacco, stress, caffeine, alcohol and cough and cold medicines can affect the natural rhythms of the heart.

#### IS AN ARRHYTHMIA SERIOUS?

Yes and no. Most arrhythmias are not detrimental and will not require any special medical attention. Bradycardia (a very slow heartbeat) is rare, but can be dangerous. Those suffering from this can feel lightheaded, and if not treated, the heart could stop beating. For those whose arrhythmia is linked with heart disease, the risk is actually connected to the heart disease itself.

#### WILL IT AFFECT ME?

According to the American Heart Association, arrhythmias are more common with age. Because many of its risk factors—such as diabetes, high blood pressure and thyroid disorders—are associated with aging, arrhythmias are more commonly found in middle age to senior adults. Other risk factors include damage to the heart muscle from a heart attack, congenital heart conditions or high or low body concentrations of potassium, calcium or magnesium. Some arrhythmias occur without any known cause.

#### WHAT CAN I DO?

Many arrhythmias will need no treatment, but those that do may require heart medications, cardioversion (electrical shock used mainly in emergency situations), an ICD (Implantable Cardioverter Defibrillator) or a pacemaker. Lifestyle changes can also be an important part of eliminating an arrhythmia. Doctors at the Cleveland Clinic in Ohio suggest quitting smoking, limiting alcohol and caffeine, and staying active. ❤️



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