

Tachycardia

What is a tachycardia?

Tachycardia is a type of abnormal heartbeat, which is known as an arrhythmia.

It occurs when your heartbeat is faster than normal, usually defined as being over 100 heartbeats per minute.

What are the types of tachycardia?

There are three different categories of tachycardia:

Sinus tachycardia

Occurs when the natural pacemaker (known as the sinus node) in your heart sends out electrical signals at a faster rate than usual.

Ventricular

Occurs when problems with the electrical signals in the lower chambers of the heart (the ventricles) result in the heart beating faster, as the ventricles beat out of sync with the atria. This affects how the body pumps blood to the rest of the body, as the chambers are unable to fill fully with each heartbeat.

Atrial/supraventricular

Occurs when problems with the electrical signals in the upper chambers of the heart (the atria) lead to the heart beating faster. This may reduce blood flow to the body, as the heart isn't functioning as effectively. Depending on the type of electrical disturbance in the atria, the rhythm may be called atrial or supraventricular tachycardia, atrial flutter or atrial fibrillation.

Sinus tachycardia

Common signs and symptoms

Common signs and symptoms of sinus tachycardia include:

- Shortness of breath
- Chest pain
- Dizziness
- Fainting or near fainting
- Anxiety
- Headaches
- Trouble exercising

Who's at risk of sinus tachycardia?

People at most risk of experiencing sinus tachycardia include people experiencing anxiety or emotional distress. It can also be caused by fever, some medications, or consuming stimulants such as caffeine, nicotine or recreational drugs.

How is sinus tachycardia treated?

In many cases, health professionals will choose to treat sinus tachycardia by recommending lifestyle changes, including avoiding stimulants, exercising and maintaining a healthy weight. Medication may also be prescribed.

Ventricular tachycardia

Common signs and symptoms

Ventricular tachycardia is almost always symptomatic.

Symptoms include:

- Heart palpitations
- Shortness of breath
- Lack of energy
- Fainting or near fainting
- Dizziness or nausea
- Chest pain

Who's at risk of ventricular tachycardia?

People with pre-existing heart conditions are most at risk of experiencing ventricular tachycardia. Known causes include structural heart disease, lack of blood flow to the heart, heart failure and cardiomyopathy, which weakens the heart muscles. People who consume excessive amounts of caffeine and alcohol are also at risk.

How is ventricular tachycardia treated?

The main treatment is to rectify any underlying conditions. Other treatments include catheter ablation to damage any extra electrical pathways within the heart, anti-arrhythmic medications and an implantable cardioverter-defibrillator. This is surgically implanted in the chest, and continuously monitors your heartbeat. If ventricular tachycardia occurs, it may deliver electrical therapy to restore a normal heartbeat. If this does not work then an electrical shock may be delivered.

Atrial and supraventricular tachycardia

Common signs and symptoms

Atrial or supraventricular tachycardia is usually symptomatic.

Symptoms include:

- Heart palpitations
- A fluttering sensation in the chest or neck
- A fast heartbeat
- Chest pain/pounding sensation
- Lightheadedness/dizziness
- High levels of sweating
- Fatigue or weakness
- Fainting or near fainting

Who's at risk of atrial or supraventricular tachycardia (SVT)?

People who may be at risk of atrial or supraventricular tachycardia are those with abnormalities in the atria.

What is the treatment for atrial or supraventricular tachycardia (SVT)?

Many people can live with these palpitations without treatment other than avoiding situations that precipitate the events. These include dehydration, alcohol, caffeine or stimulants. More specialised treatments include catheter ablation, which aims to destroy specific patches of heart muscle that are incorrectly producing electrical signals, and anti-arrhythmic medications to control the heart's rhythm.



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