

How to Manage your Heart Health?

What is an arrhythmia?

An arrhythmia is when the heart beats too fast, too slow or irregularly. These irregular heart rhythms arise because of a fault with the heart's electrical system. Arrhythmias are caused by, or arise from, a range of conditions including heart failure, blackouts, syncope (loss of consciousness), sudden cardiac arrest, heart attack, stroke and cardiomyopathy. Having a heart rhythm problem does not necessarily mean that a person has a serious heart condition. Arrhythmias affect more than two million people in the UK of any age and can occur at any time, often without warning.



Many of us are very aware of the heart's 'plumbing' problems, yet we remain largely unaware of the 'electrical' faults that cause an arrhythmia. Arrhythmias can occur in the upper chambers of the heart (atria) or in the lower chambers of the heart (ventricles).



Arrhythmia Alliance, The Heart Rhythm Charity, aims to improve the diagnosis, treatment and quality of life for all those affected by arrhythmias. Raising the awareness of arrhythmias, together we can work to secure early diagnosis and improve outcomes for the many millions of people across the globe affected by arrhythmias.

What are the different types of arrhythmia?

There are many different types of arrhythmia. Some are harmless whereas others can lead to devastating strokes or sudden death. All arrhythmias need to be investigated, diagnosed, treated or managed appropriately.

The most common arrhythmia is atrial fibrillation (AF), where electrical signals in the atria are fired in a very fast and uncontrolled manner. The electrical signals then arrive in the ventricles in a completely irregular fashion, so the heart beat becomes completely irregular. AF is a leading cause of AF-related strokes. Once diagnosed the patient should be given anticoagulation therapy to reduce the risk of an AF-related stroke and treatment to improve the heart rhythm disorder. More information about AF can be found at www.atrialfibrillation.org.uk.

Syncope – the Greek word to faint – is also very common. We each have a 50% chance of fainting at some time in our life. Most faints are due to low blood pressure, heat, tiredness and need no treatment. However syncope can also be the first symptom to a potentially life-threatening arrhythmia. The National Service Framework (NSF) for Coronary Heart Disease recommends that anyone with unexplained loss of consciousness should receive an ECG (heart rhythm reading) to rule out any underlying arrhythmia. Click [here](#) to view the full NSF for Coronary Heart Disease chapter 8. More information can also be found at www.stars.org.uk

Sinus arrhythmia: Recurring changes in the heart rate during breathing. Common in children and can be often found in adults.

Sinus tachycardia: The sinus node sends out electrical signals faster than usual, speeding up the heart rate.

Sick sinus syndrome: The sinus node does not fire its signals properly, so the heart rate slows down. Sometimes the rate changes back and forth between a slow and fast rate.

Atrial flutter: Rapidly fired signals cause the muscles in the atria to contract quickly, leading to a very fast heartbeat.

To find out more about these and other arrhythmias plus available treatments, please visit our website [here](#).

Know Your Pulse

Being aware of your pulse is important as it may indicate an abnormal heart rate or rhythm. It is a good idea to try taking your pulse at various points throughout the day (before and after various activities). Your pulse rate will change during the day depending on what activity you are doing. This is normal. To get your baseline pulse and normal rhythm, try taking your resting pulse when you wake in the morning and before going to bed.

A normal pulse (when resting) should be between 60 - 100 beats per minute. However, there are normal reasons why your pulse may be slower or faster. This may be due to age, medication taken, caffeine intake, fitness level, other illness' (including heart rhythm conditions), stress and anxiety.

You should seek further advice if:

- ♥ Your pulse seems to be racing some or most of the time and you are feeling unwell.
- ♥ Your pulse seems to be slow some or most of the time and you are feeling unwell.
- ♥ Your pulse feels irregular, "jumping around", even if you do not feel unwell.

Everyone is different and it is difficult to give precise guidelines. Many people may have pulse rates over 100 beats/min (bpm) and less than 60bpm. Irregularity is quite difficult to assess as the normal pulse can be a little irregular, varying with the phase of respiration. You should see your doctor if you have a persistent heart rate above 120 bpm or below 40 bpm.

Knowing Your Pulse with a manual pulse check is as easy as weighing yourself or knowing your blood pressure. However, if you experience palpitations or irregular pulse it is hard to detect at all times. You can watch a demonstration on how to take your pulse by visiting our web site [here](#).

As well as taking a manual pulse check, you can also purchase a handheld ECG heart monitor, such as the NICE approved AliveCor Kardia ECG. The Kardia ECG is powered by the free Kardia app that runs on compatible smartphones or tablets. Smaller than a credit card, Kardia allows you to record medical-grade ECGs and heart rate in just 30-seconds from anywhere and anytime. Kardia is the

Know Your Pulse in four steps

1

To assess your resting pulse rate in your wrist, sit down for 5 minutes beforehand. Remember that any stimulants taken before the reading will affect the rate (such as caffeine or nicotine). You will need a watch or dock with a second hand.



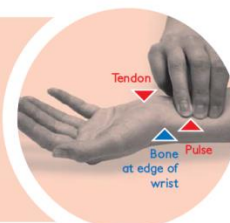
2

Take off your watch and hold your left or right hand out with your palm facing up and your elbow slightly bent.



3

With your other hand, place your index and middle fingers on your wrist, at the base of your thumb. Your fingers should sit between the bone on the edge of your wrist and the stringy tendon attached to your thumb (as shown in the image). You may need to move your fingers around a little to find the pulse. Keep firm pressure on your wrist with your fingers in order to feel your pulse.



4

Count for 30 seconds, and multiply by 2 to get your heart rate in beats per minute. If your heart rhythm is irregular, you should count for 1 minute and do not multiply.



Record your pulse here

Day	Result		Activity (e.g. after a run)
	am	pm	
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			



most clinically-validated mobile ECG available. The app-based service enables you to proactively care for the health of your heart. To find out more about the Kardia or for more information on other available mobile ECG monitors, please contact Arrhythmia Alliance at info@heartrhythmcharity.org or 01789 867501.

How to manage your heart health

It is not always possible to prevent an arrhythmia developing, although a healthy lifestyle can lower your risk of developing an arrhythmia, as well as being a benefit if you already suffer with one. A change in your lifestyle, so you avoid some of the triggers for your heart rhythm problem, can also lower the risk of future episodes.

Below is a guide designed to help you understand the basic principles of healthy eating, with tips and examples that you can follow to improve your health.

Eating a right diet can:

- ♥ Help lower your blood pressure
- ♥ Help reduce cholesterol
- ♥ Help control your weight
- ♥ Help reduce the risk of other conditions such as diabetes

The basic principles of a healthy diet:

- ♥ Be high in starches, but low in sugars and refined carbohydrates
- ♥ Be high in vegetables
- ♥ Contain small amounts of “good fats” in the right balance
- ♥ Keep well hydrated
- ♥ Contain moderate amounts of healthy proteins, including fish, nuts, fruit and dairy products
- ♥ Be low in salt, alcohol and caffeine
- ♥ Contain plenty of unprocessed foods

Top tips for eating well

Read the label – If you are buying packaged foods always read the ‘Food Labelling’ section for guidance. Look at the salt, sugars and saturated fat content to help you stay within healthy limits.

Think about – Weighing portions to help with portion control. Having a lot of vegetables with your meals fill you up as they are very low in calories and very high in protective nutrients and fibre.

A craving for sweet food – If you are craving something sweet try fresh or dried fruit, or a small chunk of dark chocolate.

Hunger – Dehydration can sometimes be the cause of hunger pains, so try a glass of water and see how you feel before you decide to eat.

Exercise and the heart

The Government ‘eat well’ plate (below) illustrates how these different elements can make your diet balanced.



Regular exercise is recommended for cardiovascular health, being inactive will cause our bodies to become unfit. This not only means you are more likely to develop heart disease or diabetes, but it also means that you are more likely to tire and become short of breath more easily. By improving your physical fitness you can help reduce these symptoms and enjoy life a little more.

Types of exercise for people with an arrhythmia

Below are some types of exercise which can be beneficial for people with an arrhythmia. However if you are unsure of what forms of exercise you should be doing please consult your doctor.

Aerobic exercise - Aerobic exercise has the most benefits for your heart; it can strengthen the heart and lungs as well as improving the body's ability to use oxygen. A good form of exercise would be any that increases your heart rate steadily and keeps it raised for a period of time. For example, walking, cycling and jogging.

Strengthening exercise - Light weights are a good form of strengthening exercises, as well as resistance bands as they are very versatile. When done regularly they help tone muscles, improve strength, and increase your metabolism. Doing simple everyday activities can also be of benefit; such as shopping, housework and gardening.

Make Your Heart Feel Good

Gentle exercise has been shown to improve cardiovascular health; with this in mind we have created two DVDs to help 'Make Your Heart Feel Good' – Dance and Tai Chi.

The dance DVD, featuring Strictly Come Dancing's Flavia Cacace and Russell Grant, brings together the glamorous and fun world of ballroom dancing with the serious nature of disease management. The program shows that regardless of your age and fitness levels, dance can encourage you to take better care of your heart health.

The Tai Chi and relaxation program is beneficial for patients with high blood pressure, as it combines mild exercise with relaxation techniques.

If you would like to order a copy of either the Dance or Tai Chi DVDs, please contact our Patient Services team on 01789 867501 or. DVDs are free to order, however we do ask for a small donation of £2 towards post and packaging.

How often should I exercise?

Maximum benefits can be achieved by gradually working up to aerobic sessions of at least 20 to 30 minutes, three to four times a week. Any amount of exercise is beneficial to your health and helps ease your symptoms. The more exercise you can do the better for your fitness.

Too much activity

You are working too hard if you:

- ♥ Cannot walk or talk without gasping for air
- ♥ You have chest pain or discomfort

Pace yourself!

When not to exercise

- ♥ If you have just eaten, wait two hours before exercising.
- ♥ If you do not feel well.
- ♥ If you have been diagnosed with heart failure, recently had an Internal Cardio Defibrillator (ICD) or a Cardiac Synchronisation Therapy device (CRT) fitted, you should consult your Doctor before starting an exercise regime.

To find out more about managing or monitor your arrhythmia please visit the Arrhythmia Alliance website: www.arrythmialliance.org.uk or call our patient services team 01789 867501.