

Palpitations

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What are palpitations?

Palpitations are heart beats that are more noticeable to you. You might feel like your heart is racing, pounding, fluttering, or beating unevenly for a few seconds or minutes. Most of the time, palpitations are scary but not serious.

Palpitations are often felt more at night or when you lie down. They may also be noticed if you have increased awareness of your heart rhythm such as if you're anxious or if you're exercising.



What causes palpitations?

There are many reasons why your heart may beat faster and cause you to experience palpitations. Some common reasons include:

- Stress or anxiety
- Fatigue or lack of sleep
- Exercise
- Some medications
- Pain
- Caffeine
- Dehydration
- Alcohol
- Fever
- Nicotine

In some cases, people can experience palpitations due to an electrical conduction problem with their heart (called an arrhythmia).

How can long COVID cause palpitations?

Some patients with long COVID experience a higher heart rate than what is normal or expected for them (it's called inappropriate sinus tachycardia). As a result, they may experience palpitations after their body experiences even just a little stress or activity.

We don't know yet for sure, but we think this is because long COVID causes our "flight or fight response" system (sympathetic nervous system) to be more sensitive. In many patients, we are finding that this improves with time and rest.

Some long COVID patients may experience an increased heart rate and palpitations when standing up. This can be due to postural orthostatic tachycardia syndrome (POTS). Click [here](#) to learn more about POTS.

When to seek medical help for your palpitations

Generally, you don't need to see a doctor if the palpitations pass quickly and only happen on occasion. In most cases, palpitations are unlikely to be caused by a serious problem.

It is recommended to see your doctor if:

- The palpitations last a long time
- The palpitations do not improve
- You have a history of heart problems

Call 9-1-1 if the palpitations are associated with shortness of breath, chest pain, dizziness, or loss of consciousness.

What to discuss with your doctor

Sometimes it is difficult for patients to explain their palpitations to their doctor. When you talk to your doctor, try your best to provide details to help them determine the cause. Your doctor may ask the following questions:

- What do the palpitations feel like?
- What causes the palpitations to come on (for example, eating, stress, walking, etc.)?
- Do you experience other symptoms with your palpitations (for example, chest pain, shortness of breath, or dizziness)?
- How often do they occur? How long do they last?

You may also want to ask your doctor if they think that further tests for your heart are required. This may include:

- Electrocardiogram (also called EKG or ECG) – it takes a “snapshot” of your heart’s electrical pattern
- 24-hour Holter monitor – it’s a device that you wear that keeps track of your heart’s electrical pattern for 24 hours
- Echocardiogram – this is an ultrasound that looks at the valves and chambers of your heart

Strategies to reduce or prevent palpitations

Strategies that are helpful to some long COVID patients include:

- Doing deep breathing or relaxation exercises (see [Breath Work](#) for more)
- Drinking less caffeine (such as coffee, black tea, and energy drinks with caffeine)
- Drinking less alcohol
- Getting more sleep
- Eating and drinking regularly

If your palpitations are related to postural orthostatic tachycardia syndrome (POTS), click [here](#) to learn about additional strategies that may be helpful.

How to monitor your heart

Consider keeping a journal of when you have palpitations to help figure out what may make them better or worse. Sometimes monitoring your heart rate can be helpful. Please see the [Heart Rate Monitoring](#) section of *MyGuide*.

References

- [5 Signs of Heart Palpitations may indicate abnormality](#) (Vejthani, 2022)
- [Canadian Cardiovascular Society Position Statement on Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome \(POTS\) and Related Disorders of](#)

[Chronic Orthostatic Intolerance](#) (Canadian Journal of Cardiology Vol. 36, Issue 3, March 2020)

- [Long COVID-19: A Primer for Cardiovascular Health Professionals](#) (Canadian Cardiovascular, 2021)

Where to next?

- Learn more about [Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome \(POTS\)](#), [Breath Work](#), and [Heart Rate Monitoring](#).

