

Heart palpitations despite healthy lifestyle

Q I am a 30-year-old man who exercises three or four times a week.

I lead a healthy lifestyle and my resting heart rate is about 60 beats a minute.

I have been experiencing a rapid heartbeat on and off, sometimes in the middle of my weights training or while walking on the street.

This rapid heartbeat, about 160 to 180 beats a minute, goes on for 20 to 30 seconds and returns to normal after that.

I have had my yearly full body check-up and my cholesterol level is within the healthy range.

Could I have an underlying heart condition which requires further investigation?

A An awareness of one's heartbeat is medically referred to as experiencing palpitations. Most of us are usually unaware of our heartbeat even though the heart beats an average of 60 to 90 times a minute.

The heartbeat naturally increases during physical exertion, such as walking or running, and sometimes

during periods of emotional stress. But it generally returns to the normal baseline once the activity is over.

In your case, the onset of the rapid heart rate appears to be sudden rather than gradual. The rate seems more rapid than what would be expected for the degree of exertion. The raised heart rate also returns to normal very rapidly.

Such situations may arise if the pattern of electrical conduction in the heart is abnormal.

This results in the electrical impulse travelling along different and abnormal pathways in the heart. This, in turn, can lead to a much faster heart rate and palpitations.

The only way a specific diagnosis can be made is by recording the heart tracing during the palpitations through an electrocardiogram (ECG).

The ECG often gives important clues to the reasons for such palpitations.

This can have implications for the diagnosis, prognosis and the specific form of treatment which the patient will respond to.

Palpitations can be divided broadly into two categories: Those which do

not pose a danger, though they may be irritating to the patient, and those which can be life-threatening.

If the palpitations are associated with loss of consciousness, they may hint at a more ominous problem, such as underlying coronary artery disease.

Further investigations may include Holter monitoring, during which one's ECG is recorded continuously for 24 hours to increase the likelihood of capturing the abnormal heartbeat, and an electrophysiology study in which wires are passed via the veins into the heart for a more detailed assessment of the circuitry.

There may also be imaging studies (such as echocardiograms and cardiac computed tomography or CT scans) to assess the structure of the heart for abnormalities.

On the basis of the diagnosis, the palpitations can either be left alone or treated with medication.

Sometimes, the problem can also be treated by radiofrequency ablation, a technique in which the conduction pathway is interrupted by applying an electrical current directly to the heart.

Once the pathway is interrupted, the palpitations usually stop.

The treatment technique will vary according to the diagnosis, the danger the palpitations poses and the patient's preference.

You should consult a cardiologist for a more detailed assessment of your condition.



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