

When you should be concerned about irregular heartbeats

Arrhythmias may lead to stroke or sudden cardiac arrest if left untreated, but are often preventable with proper care, says cardiologist Chan Po Fun



An arrhythmia can show up as fluttering, racing or skipped heartbeats but not all symptoms are obvious. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

Your heart's natural rhythm plays a crucial role in overall health, quietly pumping blood through the body. When this rhythm changes – too fast, too slow or uneven – it may indicate an arrhythmia. Heart rhythm disorders affect people of all ages, though the risks increase with age.

While many arrhythmias are harmless and may go undetected for years, others can signal underlying heart conditions or cause harm, says Mount Alvernia Hospital cardiologist Chan Po Fun. Here, she explains how to spot arrhythmias and when to seek help.

Q What are the types of arrhythmias and how can someone tell if they are experiencing it?

The heart's electrical system acts like a metronome, keeping a steady beat. Arrhythmias happen when this rhythm gets disrupted. It may race ahead (tachycardia), lag behind (bradycardia) or feel chaotic (like atrial fibrillation or frequent ectopics).

People often describe arrhythmias as the sensation of fluttering in their chest, skipped beats, a racing heart or sudden pauses. Some may feel dizzy, short of breath or unusually tired – like trying to run a marathon after just waking up.

Not every skipped beat is dangerous – sometimes it is just your heart responding to stress, caffeine or excitement. However, if the irregular beats are frequent or persistent, accompanied with symptoms like fainting, chest pain, severe shortness of breath, or if they happen without any clear reason, it is time to take them seriously.

Q What are the common causes of arrhythmias, and who is most at risk?

Arrhythmias can be triggered by many things – ageing, heart disease, high blood pressure, thyroid issues, alcohol use and even severe stress. Some

people are born with hearts that are prone to irregular beats. Those most at risk include people with a history of heart attacks, heart failure, congenital heart conditions or lifestyle factors such as excessive alcohol or caffeine intake.

Q How are arrhythmias treated, and what are the risks if left untreated?

Treatment for arrhythmias depends on the type and severity of the arrhythmia. It may be as simple as lifestyle changes or medication to regulate the rhythm. In some cases, medical interventions such as catheter ablation – a procedure that targets and treats the problem area – or the use of devices like pacemakers may be necessary.

If left untreated, certain arrhythmias may lead to stroke, heart failure or cardiovascular collapses. While serious, these consequences are often preventable once the arrhythmia is detected and treated.

Q How can lifestyle changes help in managing or preventing arrhythmias?

Think of your heart like a car engine. When you use low-quality fuel like a poor diet, ignore warning lights such as stress and symptoms, and skip regular maintenance like exercise and sleep, the engine starts sputtering. But if you fuel it well (eat healthy), drive it responsibly (stay active) and service it regularly (keep up with health screenings), it will run strong for years.



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