



Northumbria Healthcare
NHS Foundation Trust

Palpitations and Ectopic Beats

Issued by Cardiology



What are palpitations and ectopics?

The heart is a pump designed to move blood around the body. It has moving parts in the form of chambers and valves to collect blood from and then pump blood to both the lungs and the rest of the body. It has a fuel supply in the form of blood delivered down the heart arteries. The pump is controlled by an electrical signal from the heart's natural pacemaker which triggers each heartbeat. This electrical signal passes through the heart's specialised electrical wiring system to ensure all the moving parts do the right thing at the right time. When health professionals talk about palpitations we mean an awareness of your own heartbeat- either an awareness of your own normal heart rhythm or an awareness of a change in heart rhythm.

The most common cause of palpitations is ectopic beats. "Ectopic" is a medical term meaning "out of place" and ectopic beats are extra beats of your heart "out of place" from your normal steady heart rhythm. They happen due to an area within the heart's electrical circuit "firing off" between normal heart beats. When they occur, they reset the normal timing cycle of the heart. This reset causes a slightly longer gap between heartbeats which allows the heart to fill with more blood than in the previous heartbeat. As the heart is fuller than usual, it can lead to a stronger, more forceful heartbeat. Some people feel the extra ectopic beat but more often people feel the more forceful normal beat that comes after the pause. People often describe this as a flutter, flip or pounding sensation. These ectopic beats can lead the heart rate to feel irregular.

How common are they?

The ectopic beats can come on their own or in runs. Almost everyone gets them but some people have more than others and some people are more aware and sensitive to them than others. They often seem to come and go at different times in peoples' lives. In the vast majority of people they are completely harmless. Very rarely some people get so many that they can interfere with the normal pumping of the heart.

What causes ectopics?

Some people find that stimulants e.g. caffeine or alcohol can trigger ectopic beats and that avoiding these can settle things down. We also know that they can become more troublesome at times of high levels of stress. In many people, there is no clear reason why the ectopics have flared up.

Most people feel reassured once they have had the cause of their palpitations explained to them and they know they are harmless. Sometimes people get benefit from medicines to help stop the extra beats from happening. Some people find that the awareness of the ectopic beats can be very intrusive and makes them feel anxious or distressed. This distress can actually make you "tune into" the ectopic beats so you notice them even more.

What if I struggle to cope with ectopics?

Once you have been told you have ectopics, your cardiologist will have explained that they are a safe type of irregular heartbeat. But after you have chewed that idea round, have you been able to swallow it and digest it? Have you been able to accept that? Or have you spat out the message and thought 'that can't be right'? Some people find it hard to accept the diagnosis and so begin to doubt their doctor and worry that 'something has been missed'.

If you are very troubled by ectopics, it is likely that you are one of the people who have a strong awareness of your ectopics. The sensation of the heart fluttering or suddenly beating strongly, like a thump in the chest, can be very frightening. It can lead to thoughts such as:

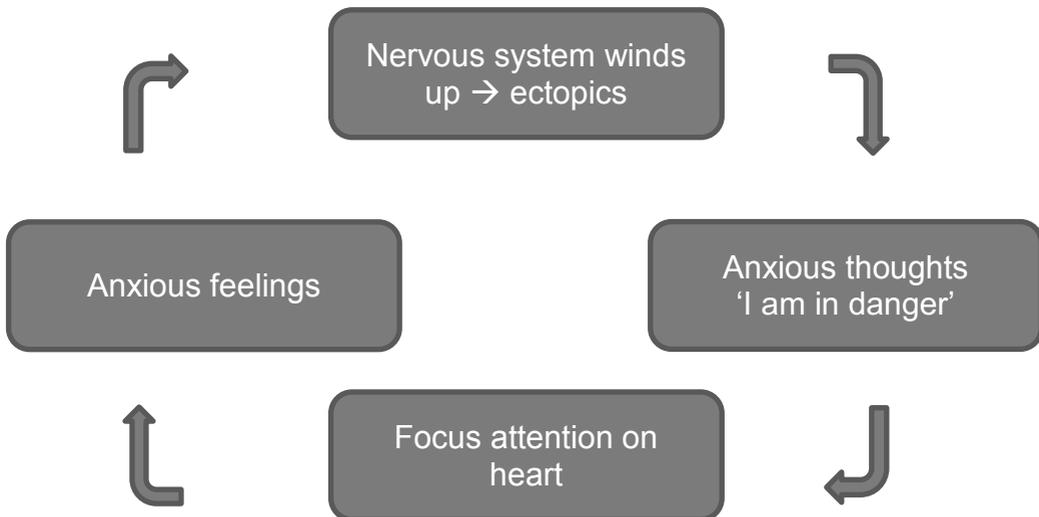
‘I’m going to die’,

‘My heart is going to pack up’,

‘I’m not going to survive’, or

‘This can’t be normal or safe’.

Thoughts like those are very difficult to ignore or distract yourself from. Those thoughts will be telling you ‘I am in danger’ and ‘I need to be on my guard’. They can really push up anxious feelings and lead to paying lots of attention to the heart. Unfortunately, anxiety winds up the nervous system, which can affect the heart’s rate and regularity. That can lead to more ectopics and even more anxious thoughts and feelings. In other words, ectopics can end up in a vicious circle, as shown below:



This doesn't mean your ectopics are 'all in the mind'. But they aren't all in the heart either. Like all health conditions, they affect the body and the mind. The good news is there are several things which can help you to slow down, pause or even reverse the vicious circle. You probably won't feel better immediately but if you stick with it, over time your symptoms are likely to ease.

One of the worst aspects of any heart rhythm problem is not easily being able to control our own heart rate. The best way to become calm and settle the heart is to establish the conditions for it to settle itself, by calming your body and mind.

What can help calm the body?

Most people think of relaxation as whatever they do when they aren't working or carrying out chores. Those activities might help to calm the body and reduce the effects of stress. Some can have the opposite effect, because we sometimes enjoy the way stress makes us feel. Just ask a football fan if they go to games to relax! Have a think about the things you do when you're not busy. Are there certain times of each day when you are physically and mentally relaxed? Do you allow yourself the 'luxury' of some calm time? Or are you struggling with multiple demands and stresses which keep the body tense and like a shaken unopened bottle of pop? Could the ectopics be your body's way of telling you to release a bit of pressure?

There are lots of ways to relax the body but the most helpful advice is to find what works best for you. Some people find gentle exercise, like walking at a sensible pace, works well. Others find listening to relaxing music or words can help. Some find meditation/ mindfulness techniques helpful (see www.freemindfulness.org for some helpful mindfulness exercises and information). Gentle, relaxed breathing can also help and there are lots of helpful online guides to this. Your GP practice will be able to signpost you to some useful resources.

What helps to calm the mind?

All of us have hearts which produce either extra beats or missed beats. That's completely normal and safe and is not a sign you have anything wrong with your heart. Lots of us aren't aware of these symptoms but sometimes our brain does notice them and the brain then sees them as potentially dangerous. If the brain thinks they could be a sign of something wrong with our heart, it can end up being on high alert for every change in the heart's beating. You may need to learn to re-train the brain to stop sending you the heart alarm messages.

Remember that thoughts are just thoughts. Our thoughts are often inaccurate, even when we are sure they are correct. For example, ectopics can make us feel repeatedly that our heart cannot cope with the strain and is about to pack up. But ectopics show just how strong and fit your heart is. The thumps and flutters you feel are symptoms of your heart muscle having a good work out. As long as you keep reminding yourself that your ectopics are not dangerous and are not going to harm you, over time your brain will be able to let go of 'tuning into the heart' and you should feel better. If you can learn to accept these symptoms as just troublesome and not dangerous, your mind will settle and you will feel less troubled.

Even if stress is not necessarily the cause of your ectopics, they can be very stressful to live with. This can stir up anxiety, frustration and despair. If you continue to be troubled by ectopics, you might find it helpful to speak to a clinical psychologist or psychological therapist. Your cardiologist or GP will be able to help steer you in the right direction.

Useful resources

Mindfulness websites/apps

www.breathworks-mindfulness.org.uk - information about mindfulness, including mindfulness-based pain management. The website includes a three-minute breathing space meditation.

<http://www.freemindfulness.org> - downloadable meditation exercises.

The following apps are currently included on the NHS apps library (<https://www.nhs.uk/apps-library/>) which ensures that they are clinically safe and secure to use

<https://bemindful.co.uk> - a website about mindfulness from the Mental health Foundation, including online learning.

Feeling Good: positive mindset. Audios for Stress & Depression

Headspace (mindfulness app) - a popular meditation and mindfulness

Insight Timer app - this app offers over 6,000 free guided meditations, and is free to download. Search your device app store for 'Insight Timer'.

Books

'Mindfulness for Health, A practical guide to relieving pain, reducing stress and restoring wellbeing' by Vidyamala Burch and Danny Penman (awarded the British Medical Association book of the year for popular science 2014)

'The Little Mindfulness Workbook', by Gary Hennessey

'The Headspace Guide to Mindfulness & Meditation', by Andy Puddicombe

Alternative Formats

If you would like a copy of this information in large print, another language, audio tape or other format please call the Contact Centre on **03 44 811 8118**

Other sources of information

NHS 111

NHS Choices

www.nhs.uk/pages/homepage.aspx

NICE (National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence)

www.nice.org.uk

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

Freephone: **0800 032 0202**

Text: 07815 500015

Email: northoftynepals@nhct.nhs.uk

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www.northumbria.nhs.uk

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