
Cardiac ablation procedures

Definition

Ablate means "to destroy." Cardiac ablation is a procedure that is used to destroy small areas in your heart that may be causing your heart rhythm problems.

During the procedure, small wires called electrodes are placed inside your heart to measure your heart's electrical activity. These electrodes may also be used to destroy the bad areas of your heart.

Alternative Names

Catheter ablation; Radiofrequency catheter ablation

Description

Cardiac ablation procedures are done in a hospital laboratory by specially trained staff. This includes cardiologists (heart doctors) trained in electrophysiology, technicians, and nurses. The setting is safe and controlled to make your risk as low as possible.

You will be given a mild sedative before the procedure to help you relax.

- The skin on your neck, arm, or groin will be cleaned well and made numb with an anesthetic.
- Next, the cardiologist will make a small cut in the skin.
- A small, flexible tube (catheter) will be inserted through this cut into one of the blood vessels in this area. The doctor uses live x-ray images to carefully guide the catheter up into your heart.

Once the catheter is in place, your doctor places small electrodes in different areas of your heart.

- These electrodes are connected to monitors that allow the cardiologist to tell what area in your heart is causing problems with your heart rhythm. Usually, there are one or more specific areas.
- Once the source of the problem has been found, one of the catheter lines is used to send electrical (or sometimes cold) energy to the problem area.
- This destroys the problem area, creating a small scar that causes the heart rhythm problem to stop.

Catheter ablation is a long procedure that can last 4 or more hours. During the procedure your heart will be monitored closely. A nurse or doctor may ask you if you are having symptoms at different times during the procedure. Symptoms you may feel are:

- A brief burning when any medicines are injected
- A faster or stronger heartbeat
- Light-headedness
- Burning when the electrical energy is used

Risks

Catheter ablation is generally safe. Talk with your doctor about these rare complications:

- Bleeding or blood pooling where the catheter is inserted
- Blood clot that goes to arteries in your leg, heart, or brain
- Damage to the artery where the catheter is inserted
- Damage to heart valves
- Damage to the coronary arteries (blood vessels that carry blood to your heart)
- Esophageal atrial fistula (a connection that forms between your esophagus and part of your heart)
- Fluid around the heart (cardiac tamponade)
- Heart attack
- Vagal or phrenic nerve damage



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