

## Ectopic heartbeat

### Definition

Ectopic heartbeat is an irregularity of the heart rate and heart rhythm involving extra or skipped heartbeats.

### Alternative Names

PVB (premature ventricular beat);  
Premature ventricular contraction;  
Premature beats; PVC (premature ventricular contraction); Extrasystole

### Causes

Ectopic heartbeats are small variations in an otherwise normal heartbeat that causes an irregular pulse. They may occur without an obvious cause and are usually harmless.

Sometimes they are associated with chemical (electrolyte) problems in the blood, which need treatment. They can also happen with ischemia caused by a decrease in blood supply to the heart. They may also occur in patients with diseases involving heart muscle disease.

Ectopic beats may be caused or made worse by excessive smoking, alcohol consumption, caffeine, certain medications such as stimulants, and some illicit drugs.

Ectopic beats are rare in children who do not have congenital heart disease. Most extra heartbeats in children are premature atrial contractions (PACs), which are almost always benign.

In adults, ectopic beats are common. Their causes should be investigated even if it turns out that no treatment is needed.

### Symptoms

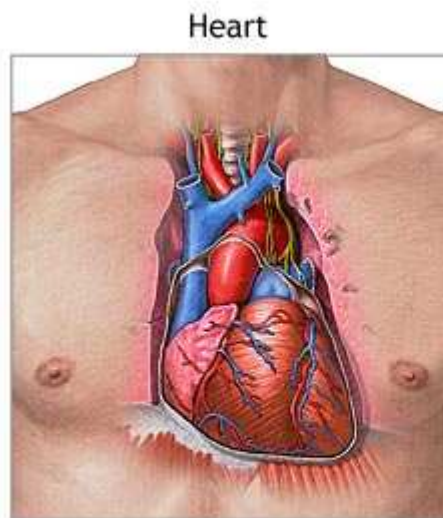
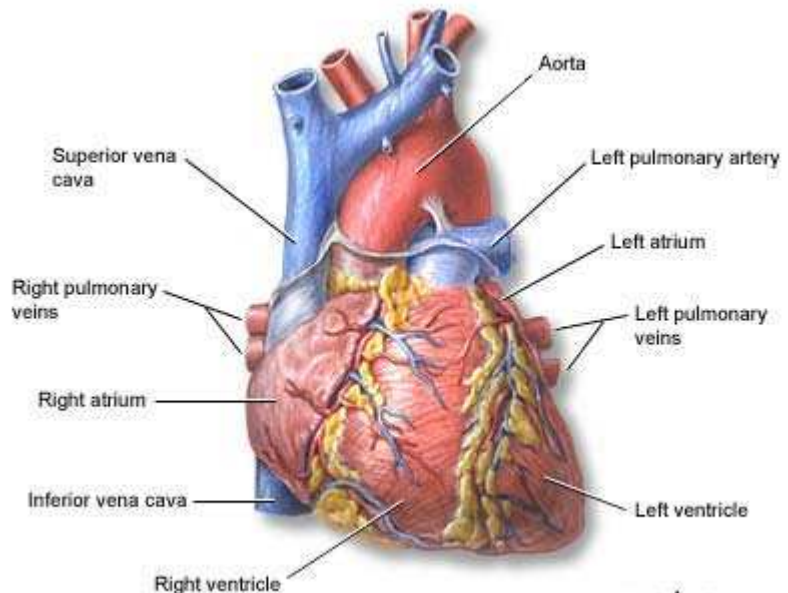
Symptoms include:

- Feeling your heart beat (palpitations)
- Feeling like your heart stopped or skipped a beat
- Feeling of occasional, forceful beats

Note: There may be no symptoms.

### Exams and Tests

A physical examination may show an occasional, irregular pulse, but if the ectopic beats do not occur frequently, your doctor may not detect them during a physical exam.



### Electrocardiogram



ADAM.

Blood pressure is usually normal.

The following tests may be done:

- Continuous ambulatory cardiac monitoring (Holter monitor or patient-activated recording device)
- Coronary angiography
- ECG
- Echocardiogram

## Treatment

Most ectopic heartbeats do not require treatment. The condition is treated if your symptoms are severe or if the extra beats occur very frequently.

An underlying cause, if discovered, may also require treatment.

## Outlook (Prognosis)

Ectopic heartbeats are generally benign, requiring no treatment. Occasionally, they may indicate an increased risk for other cardiac arrhythmias.

## Possible Complications

- Ventricular tachycardia (occasionally)
- Other arrhythmias (occasionally)

Note: There usually are no complications.

## When to Contact a Medical Professional

Call your health care provider if you have persistent palpitations, or palpitations with chest pain or other symptoms.

Also call your health care provider if you have this condition and your symptoms worsen or do not improve with treatment.

## Prevention

Limiting caffeine, alcohol, and tobacco may reduce the risk and frequency of ectopic heartbeats in certain people. Exercise often helps those who are inactive.

## References

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Toth PP, Shammass NW, Dippel EJ, Foreman B. Cardiac electrophysiology and arrhythmias. In: Rakel RE. *Textbook of Family Practice*. 7th ed. Philadelphia, Pa: WB Saunders; 2007:chap. 39.



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