

A Patient Guide

Understanding Arrhythmias



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A sudden flutter in the chest. A skipped heartbeat. A racing pulse out of nowhere. For many, these sensations can be unsettling, raising questions about whether they signal a harmless quirk of the heart or something far more serious.

Arrhythmias occur when the electrical signals that regulate the heartbeat become irregular. Some result in a fast heartbeat (tachycardia), while others cause a slow rhythm (bradycardia) or erratic beats.

The symptoms vary widely but commonly include palpitations—often described as fluttering, racing, or skipping beats—along with dizziness, fainting, blackouts, shortness of breath, lethargy, and in some cases, chest pain. While some arrhythmias are harmless, others can increase the risk of stroke, heart failure, or sudden cardiac arrest.

Harmless or Dangerous? How to Tell the Difference

For many, palpitations are simply an increased awareness of their heartbeat. “It can be difficult to differentiate harmless palpitations from serious arrhythmias,” says Dr. Suraya Hani Kamsani, Consultant Cardiologist, Institut Jantung Negara. A full medical history is key, she adds.

Generally, young individuals without a history of heart disease or risk factors such as high blood pressure or diabetes are less likely to have a life-threatening condition. However, those with underlying heart disease, prior surgeries, or a history of fainting should be more cautious.

Certain red flags require immediate attention. “If you experience difficulty breathing, sudden dizziness, or fainting spells, you should seek urgent medical care,” Dr. Suraya advises.

Lifestyle Choices That Support a Healthy Heart

Regardless of one’s risk profile, maintaining a healthy lifestyle is fundamental in preventing and managing arrhythmias.

“A sedentary lifestyle and overindulgence in food contribute to poor heart health hence moderation is key,” Dr. Suraya says. For those already diagnosed with conditions such as hypertension or diabetes, dietary discipline becomes even more critical.

Exercise is highly encouraged, though many patients worry about physical limitations. “Even simple activities, like an evening walk, can make a significant difference,” she notes.



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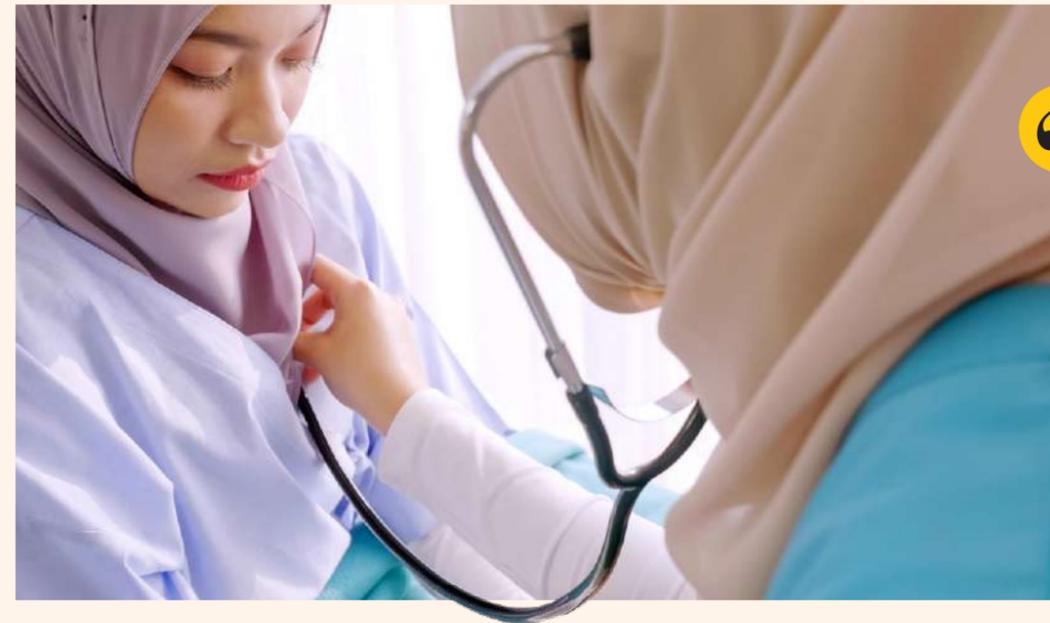
The Importance of Medication Adherence

Many arrhythmia patients require long-term medications, such as antiarrhythmic drugs or anticoagulants (blood thinners), to prevent complications like stroke. However, medication adherence can be a challenge.

“It takes a lot of counseling,” Dr. Suraya explains. “Patients with busy lifestyles often forget doses, and when cholesterol or blood pressure isn’t well controlled, we have to keep increasing medication doses.” Finding a routine and sticking to it can make adherence easier.

Understanding Anticoagulation Therapy for Stroke Prevention

For patients with atrial fibrillation (AFib), an irregular heart rhythm that increases stroke risk, anticoagulants are essential. “As we age, the risk of stroke rises,” says Dr. Suraya. “If you’re over 65, diabetic, or hypertensive, the benefits of blood thinners



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often outweigh the risks.” However, careful risk stratification is necessary to balance stroke prevention with bleeding risks.

For some, implanted devices like pacemakers or defibrillators become necessary. Pacemakers regulate slow heart rates, while defibrillators prevent sudden cardiac death in patients at high risk.

“These are minor procedures performed under sedation with local anaesthesia,” Dr. Suraya explains. “The risks are minimal—less than 1%—but, as with any invasive procedure, there’s always a possibility of complications.”

Seeking The Right Care

Recognising when to seek medical help can be lifesaving. Dr. Suraya stresses that symptoms such as sudden and severe shortness of breath, fainting or unexplained blackouts, chest pains or persistent dizziness warrant immediate attention:

“If in doubt, it’s better to seek medical advice than to wait,” she says.

Additionally, for many patients, arrhythmias cause not just physical symptoms but also anxiety and fear.

“The psychological impact is often underrecognized and undertreated,” says Dr. Suraya. While some arrhythmias, such as supraventricular tachycardia (SVT), are curable with procedures, others require lifelong management.

“We don’t just focus on symptoms—we also ask about quality of life. If needed, we refer patients for counselling or psychiatric support.”

Cardioversion—used to restore normal heart rhythm—is a relatively straightforward and controlled procedure, but catheter ablation, which targets abnormal electrical pathways in the heart, can be more complex.

“I use models and diagrams to help patients understand,” Dr. Suraya says. “It’s important they feel confident and informed before undergoing treatment.”

Rather than restrictive diets, Dr. Suraya encourages patients to adopt long-term, realistic habits. “I recommend using apps to track food intake,” she says. “Many people don’t realize how calorie-dense some foods are.” Exercise should also be sustainable, with a focus on consistency rather than intensity.

Managing arrhythmias doesn’t have to be a solo journey. Dr. Suraya recommends patient education booklets, that are available in English, Malay, and Mandarin in IJN, support

Empowering Patients Through Education

Every patient’s journey with arrhythmia is unique. Tailoring educational approaches based on individual health literacy is key.

“Patients need to feel involved in their own care,” Dr. Suraya emphasises. “We guide them to make informed decisions rather than simply telling them what to do. If you’d trust an expert for an expensive car repair, why not do the same for your heart?”

Ultimately, understanding arrhythmias—and taking proactive steps in lifestyle, medication adherence, and emergency preparedness—can make all the difference in leading a full and healthy life.