

Arrhythmias

What are arrhythmias?

An arrhythmia is an irregular heart rhythm. Variations in heart rhythm are common and do not always need treatment.

A slow heart rate is called 'bradycardia'. A fast heart rate is called 'tachycardia'. A fast heart rate is often due to an extra electrical connection between the atria and the ventricles (the chambers of the heart).

What are the symptoms?

The child may feel dizzy or faint. The child may have palpitations although these do not usually last very long.

What tests will my child need?

An electrocardiogram (ECG) can help to diagnose what type of arrhythmia your child has. This test is described on page 8 of the British Heart Foundation booklet Children with heart conditions. Sometimes the ECG recording is taken over a longer period (usually 24 hours), using a small ECG tape-recorder which your child can use at home. The tape-recorder can be worn on a belt around the waist.

What treatment will be needed?

An irregular heart rhythm either shows or may be first noticed in a baby before birth. A slow rate will not usually cause any problems. A fast rate in an unborn baby may be treated by giving the mother medication.

After birth, if the attacks carry on or become more frequent, the child may be given medication. Or a treatment called radio frequency ablation might be considered. This is a procedure to destroy the extra electrical connection using an electrical catheter.

Having a pacemaker

A child born with a slow heart rate, known as congenital heart block, may at some stage need to have a pacemaker fitted to increase his or her heart rate. A pacemaker is a small battery and a tiny computer – about the size of a 50p piece – which is usually placed under the skin in the abdomen. (In an older child the pacemaker is placed in the upper chest.) A wire from the pacemaker leads to the child's heart. This wire will be coiled slightly to allow for your child's growth but the pacemaker will still have to be replaced at intervals as your child grows.

What about follow-up?

Your child will need a check-up about once every six months.

Should I restrict what my child does?

Ask your cardiologist if you need to restrict your child's activities. If your child has had a pacemaker fitted he or she should avoid contact sports such as boxing or rugby which may cause the site of the implant to be knocked.

Preventing endocarditis

In children who have had a pacemaker fitted, it is important to prevent endocarditis. Endocarditis is an infection of the lining of the heart or heart valves. (See pages 18-19 of the booklet *Children with heart conditions*.)

You can get a free endocarditis card from the British Heart Foundation. This is a small card which states your child needs to take antibiotics before certain forms of surgery or dental treatment. Show the card to any doctor or dentist who is treating your child.