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Heart Palpitations May be Sign of Serious Condition

When the middle of February occurs each year, thoughts of that special someone may cause us to feel lightheaded and set our hearts racing. While that may be fine for Valentine's Day, when the big day is over and the heart is still beating faster than it normally does, it is time to consider seeing a doctor.

Commonly referred to as heart palpitations, irregular heartbeats may be a sign that something is seriously wrong with the body's pump. Two types of rapid heartbeat will be discussed here. The first, paroxysmal atrial tachycardia (PAT) is a sudden, unexpected episode in which the heart starts to beat as many as 160 to 200 beats per minute. (Paroxysmal refers to the sudden nature of the attack, and tachycardia means that the heart beat is accelerated.) Although seldom life-threatening, this condition can interfere with the activities of daily living, and can produce symptoms such as lightheadedness, chest pain, palpitations, sweating, anxiety, and shortness of breath.

For many people, conservative measures such as holding the nose and breathing out with the mouth closed, swallowing ice cold water, or massaging a particular area in the neck offer relief. For other people, an injection of appropriate drugs may help stop an episode, but they do not cure the condition. Sometimes an electric shock to the heart may be warranted. And, although rare, some people require a procedure called an ablation, in which the area of the heart that causes the abnormal heart rhythm is heated until the pathway is destroyed.

There is a second type of tachycardia which may occur – ventricular tachycardia (V-tach). In PAT, the upper chambers of the heart are beating abnormally fast. V-tach refers to a rapid heartbeat in one of the lower chambers. This type of tachycardia is more serious and tends to cause more severe symptoms and can even lead to death. Most ventricular tachycardias are associated with serious heart disease, such as coronary artery blockage. It also occurs frequently in relation to a heart attack. If the V-tach is not treated quickly, the ventricles (chambers) of the heart do not fill adequately, so the heart cannot pump normally. This can result in loss of blood pressure, loss of consciousness, and heart failure.

Symptoms of ventricular tachycardia include chest pain, palpitations (nearly all individuals with V-tach experience palpitations,) anxiety, profuse sweating, agitation, lethargy, and coma. But on occasion, there are no symptoms at all. This condition is easily diagnosed with an electrocardiogram, and can usually be controlled in most people with appropriate drug treatment or surgery. It is one of the most frequently observed conditions of abnormal heart rhythm in the United States. Although most people with V-tach are men, as more and more women acquire coronary heart disease, the incidence of ventricular tachycardia in women will increase as well.

During this month of February, designated National Heart Month, we all would do well to consider our own heart health. Proper diet and regular exercise are key ingredients in maintaining a healthy heart, but we should not neglect an annual physical examination. And it is important to heed our doctors' advice to have regular electrocardiograms according to prescribed schedules based on age and medical history.