

# Substances That Can Cause Heart Rhythm Disorders

Thousands of substances have the potential to affect the heart's electrical system and alter its ability to pump blood through the body. Many illegal, prescription and over-the-counter drugs, as well as alcohol, tobacco, certain foods and other substances, can affect the electrical signals that stimulate the heartbeat.



## Caffeine, Diet and Heart Arrhythmias

Caffeine is the most common substance associated with heart arrhythmias. Some people feel heart palpitations when they drink coffee or tea or eat chocolate. Red wine and eating too much can bring about symptoms in others. These rhythm problems are rarely serious.

## Substance Abuse: Drugs and Inhalants

Abusing legal or illegal drugs can lead to dangerous arrhythmias.

## Alcohol

Small amounts (less than one drink a day) of alcohol may reduce the incidence of heart problems and increase "good" cholesterol (HDL cholesterol). But, for some people, alcohol can create heart rhythm disturbances. Alcohol abuse is a major risk factor for high blood pressure, cardiomyopathy, heart failure and stroke.

## Tobacco

Tobacco causes more heart and blood vessel disease, stroke and heart-related deaths than all illegal drugs combined. It contributes to as much as one-third of all cardiovascular disease.

## Dietary Supplements & Over-the-Counter Medications

Some herbs and other substances used in over-the-counter remedies are believed to improve abnormal heart rhythms. Others can make them worse or interfere with heart medications. Diet pills can be especially problematic. Patients should always consult their health-care provider before taking any medication or supplement.

## Prescription Drugs

While most medicines prescribed by physicians are beneficial to health, occasionally side effects can be detrimental. Certain medications

commonly prescribed for arrhythmias, heart disease and high blood pressure can themselves cause heart problems, including rhythm disturbances. The best course of action for patients is to be aware of symptoms and work closely with a physician.

## Substances in the Environment & Workplace

Hundreds of substances in the environment can cause arrhythmias, heart disease and death. In general, people at greatest risk are those who handle or come into contact with dangerous substances in the workplace.

A few of the substances that can cause problems are: automobile emissions, cigarette smoke, pollution from industrial plants, paint thinners and propane gas.