The clinical treatments described and recommended in this publication are based on research and consultation with nursing, medical, and legal authorities. To the best of our knowledge, these procedures reflect currently accepted practice. Nevertheless, they can’t be considered absolute and universal recommendations. For individual applications, all recommendations must be considered in light of the patient’s clinical condition and, before administration of new or infrequently used drugs, in light of the latest package-insert information. The authors and publisher disclaim any responsibility for any adverse effects resulting from the suggested procedures, from any undetected errors, or from the reader’s misunderstanding of the text.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
ECG interpretation made incredibly easy! — 5th ed.
p. ; cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
RC683.5.E5E256 2011
616.1’207547—dc22
# Contents

*Contributors and consultants* vi

*Not another boring foreword* vii

## Part I  ECG fundamentals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Cardiac anatomy and physiology</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Obtaining a rhythm strip</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Interpreting a rhythm strip</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Part II  Recognizing arrhythmias

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Sinus node arrhythmias</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Atrial arrhythmias</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Junctional arrhythmias</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Ventricular arrhythmias</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Atrioventricular blocks</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Part III  Treating arrhythmias

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Nonpharmacologic treatments</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Pharmacologic treatments</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Part IV  The 12-lead ECG

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Obtaining a 12-lead ECG</td>
<td>239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Interpreting a 12-lead ECG</td>
<td>255</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Appendices and index

- Practice makes perfect 286
- ACLS algorithms 304
- Brushing up on interpretation skills 310
- Look-alike ECG challenge 348
- Quick guide to arrhythmias 359
- Glossary 364
- Selected references 366
- Index 367
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Not another boring foreword

If you’re like me, you’re too busy to wade through a foreword that uses pretentious terms and umpteen dull paragraphs to get to the point. So let’s cut right to the chase! Here’s why this book is so terrific:

1. It will teach you all the important things you need to know about ECG interpretation. (And it will leave out all the fluff that wastes your time.)

2. It will help you remember what you’ve learned.

3. It will make you smile as it enhances your knowledge and skills.
   Don’t believe me? Try these recurring logos on for size:

   **Ages and stages** identifies variations in ECGs related to patient age.

   **Now I get it** offers crystal-clear explanations of complex procedures, such as how to use an automated external defibrillator.

   **Don’t skip this strip** identifies arrhythmias that have the most serious consequences.

   **Mixed signals** provides tips on how to solve the most common problems in ECG monitoring and interpretation.

   **I can’t waste time** highlights key points you need to know about each arrhythmia for quick reviews.

   See? I told you! And that’s not all. Look for me and my friends in the margins throughout this book. We’ll be there to explain key concepts, provide important care reminders, and offer reassurance. Oh, and if you don’t mind, we’ll be spicing up the pages with a bit of humor along the way, to teach and entertain in a way that no other resource can.

   I hope you find this book helpful. Best of luck throughout your career!

   Joy
Part I  ECG fundamentals

1  Cardiac anatomy and physiology  3

2  Obtaining a rhythm strip  23

3  Interpreting a rhythm strip  43
Cardiac anatomy and physiology

In this chapter, you’ll learn:

♦ the location and structure of the heart
♦ the layers of the heart wall
♦ the flow of blood to and through the heart and the structures involved in this flow
♦ phases of the cardiac cycle
♦ properties of cardiac cells
♦ details of cardiac impulse conduction and their relationship to arrhythmias.

A look at cardiac anatomy

Cardiac anatomy includes the location of the heart; the structure of the heart, heart wall, chambers, and valves; and the layout and structure of coronary circulation.

Outside the heart

The heart is a cone-shaped, muscular organ. It’s located in the chest, behind the sternum in the mediastinal cavity (or mediastinum), between the lungs, and in front of the spine. The heart lies tilted in this area like an upside-down triangle. The top of the heart, or its base, lies just below the second rib; the bottom of the heart, or its apex, tilts forward and down, toward the left side of the body, and rests on the diaphragm. (See Location of the pediatric heart, page 4.)
The heart varies in size depending on the person’s body size, but the organ is roughly 5” (12.5 cm) long and 3½” (9 cm) wide, or about the size of the person’s fist. The heart’s weight, typically 9 to 12 oz (255 to 340 g), varies depending on the person’s size, age, sex, and athletic conditioning. An athlete’s heart usually weighs more than that of the average person, and an elderly person’s heart weighs less. (See The older adult heart.)

Layer upon layer
The heart’s wall is made up of three layers: the epicardium, myocardium, and endocardium. (See Layers of the heart wall.) The epicardium, the outer layer (and the visceral layer of the serous pericardium), is made up of squamous epithelial cells overlying connective tissue. The myocardium, the middle layer, makes up the largest portion of the heart’s wall. This layer of muscle tissue contracts with each heartbeat. The endocardium, the heart’s innermost layer, contains endothelial tissue with small blood vessels and bundles of smooth muscle.

A layer of connective tissue called the pericardium surrounds the heart and acts as a tough, protective sac. It consists of the fibrous pericardium and the serous pericardium. The fibrous pericardium, composed of tough, white, fibrous tissue, fits loosely around the heart, protecting it. The fibrous pericardium attaches to the great vessels, diaphragm, and sternum. The serous pericardium, the thin, smooth, inner portion, has two layers:
• the parietal layer, which lines the inside of the fibrous pericardium
• the visceral layer, which adheres to the surface of the heart.

Between the layers
The pericardial space separates the visceral and parietal layers and contains 10 to 20 ml of thin, clear pericardial fluid that lubricates the two surfaces and cushions the heart. Excess pericardial fluid, a condition called pericardial effusion, compromises the heart’s ability to pump blood.

Inside the heart
The heart contains four chambers—two atria and two ventricles. (See Inside a normal heart, page 6.) The right and left atria serve as volume reservoirs for blood being sent into the ventricles. The right atrium receives deoxygenated blood returning from the body through the inferior and superior vena cavae and from the heart through the coronary sinus. The left atrium receives oxygenated blood from the lungs through the four pulmonary veins. The interatrial septum divides the chambers and helps them contract. Contraction of the atria forces blood into the ventricles below.
A LOOK AT CARDIAC ANATOMY

Pump up the volume

The right and left ventricles serve as the pumping chambers of the heart. The right ventricle receives blood from the right atrium and pumps it through the pulmonary arteries to the lungs, where it picks up oxygen and drops off carbon dioxide. The left ventricle receives oxygenated blood from the left atrium and pumps it through the aorta and then out to the rest of the body. The interventricular septum separates the ventricles and also helps them to pump.

The thickness of a chamber’s walls depends on the amount of high-pressure work the chamber does. Because the atria collect blood for the ventricles and don’t pump it far, their walls are considerably thinner than the walls of the ventricles. Likewise, the left ventricle has a much thicker wall than the right ventricle because the left ventricle pumps blood against the higher pressures in the body’s arterial circulation, whereas the right ventricle pumps blood against the lower pressures in the lungs.

Layers of the heart wall

This cross section of the heart wall shows its various layers.

Pericardial space
Fibrous pericardium
Parietal pericardium
Epicardium
Myocardium
Endocardium

The older adult heart

As a person ages, his heart usually becomes slightly smaller and loses its contractile strength and efficiency (although exceptions occur in people with hypertension or heart disease). By age 70, cardiac output at rest has diminished by 30% to 35% in many people.

Irritable with age

As the myocardium of the aging heart becomes more irritable, extra systoles may occur, along with sinus arrhythmias and sinus bradycardias. In addition, increased fibrous tissue infiltrates the sinoatrial node and internodal atrial tracts, which may cause atrial fibrillation and flutter.
One-way valves

The heart contains four valves—two atrioventricular (AV) valves (tricuspid and mitral) and two semilunar valves (aortic and pulmonic). The valves open and close in response to changes in pressure within the chambers they connect. They serve as one-way doors that keep blood flowing through the heart in a forward direction.

When the valves close, they prevent backflow, or regurgitation, of blood from one chamber to another. The closing of the valves creates the heart sounds that are heard through a stethoscope.

The two AV valves, located between the atria and ventricles, are called the tricuspid and mitral valves. The tricuspid valve is located between the right atrium and the right ventricle. The mitral valve is located between the left atrium and the left ventricle.
Cardiac cords

The mitral valve has two cusps, or leaflets, and the tricuspid valve has three. The cusps are anchored to the papillary muscles in the heart wall by fibers called chordae tendineae. These cords work together to prevent the cusps from bulging backward into the atria during ventricular contraction. If damage occurs, blood can flow backward into a chamber, resulting in a heart murmur.

Under pressure

The semilunar valves are the pulmonic valve and the aortic valve. These valves are called semilunar because the cusps resemble three half-moons. Because of the high pressures exerted on the valves, their structure is much simpler than that of the AV valves.

They open due to pressure within the ventricles and close due to the back pressure of blood in the pulmonary arteries and aorta, which pushes the cusps closed. The pulmonic valve, located where the pulmonary artery meets the right ventricle, permits blood to flow from the right ventricle to the pulmonary artery and prevents blood backflow into that ventricle. The aortic valve, located where the left ventricle meets the aorta, allows blood to flow from the left ventricle to the aorta and prevents blood backflow into the left ventricle.

Blood flow through the heart

Understanding how blood flows through the heart is critical to understanding the heart’s overall functions and how changes in electrical activity affect peripheral blood flow. Deoxygenated blood from the body returns to the heart through the inferior and superior vena cavae and empties into the right atrium. From there, blood flows through the tricuspid valve into the right ventricle.

Circuit city

The right ventricle pumps blood through the pulmonic valve into the pulmonary arteries and then into the lungs. From the lungs, blood flows through the pulmonary veins and empties into the left atrium, which completes a circuit called pulmonary circulation.

When pressure rises to a critical point in the left atrium, the mitral valve opens and blood flows into the left ventricle. The left ventricle then contracts and pumps blood through the aortic valve into the aorta, and then throughout the body. Blood returns to the right atrium through the veins, completing a circuit called systemic circulation.
Getting into circulation

Like the brain and all other organs, the heart needs an adequate supply of blood to survive. The coronary arteries, which lie on the surface of the heart, supply the heart muscle with blood and oxygen. Understanding coronary blood flow can help you provide better care for a patient with a myocardial infarction (MI) because you’ll be able to predict which areas of the heart would be affected by a blockage in a particular coronary artery.

Open that ostium

The coronary ostium, an opening in the aorta that feeds blood to the coronary arteries, is located near the aortic valve. During systole, when the left ventricle is pumping blood through the aorta and the aortic valve is open, the coronary ostium is partially covered. During diastole, when the left ventricle is filling with blood, the aortic valve is closed and the coronary ostium is open, enabling blood to fill the coronary arteries.

With a shortened diastole, which occurs during periods of tachycardia, less blood flows through the ostium into the coronary arteries. Tachycardia also impedes coronary blood flow because contraction of the ventricles squeezes the arteries and lessens blood flow through them.

That’s right, Coronary

The right coronary artery, as well as the left coronary artery (also known as the left main artery), originates as a single branch off the ascending aorta from the area known as the sinuses of Valsalva. The right coronary artery supplies blood to the right atrium, the right ventricle, and part of the inferior and posterior surfaces of the left ventricle. In about 50% of the population, the artery also supplies blood to the sinoatrial (SA) node. The bundle of His and the AV node also receive their blood supply from the right coronary artery.

What’s left, Coronary?

The left coronary artery runs along the surface of the left atrium, where it splits into two major branches, the left anterior descending and the left circumflex arteries. The left anterior descending artery runs down the surface of the left ventricle toward the apex and supplies blood to the anterior wall of the left ventricle, the interventricular septum, the right bundle branch, and the left anterior fasciculus of the left bundle branch. The branches of the left anterior descending artery—the septal perforators and the diagonal arteries—help supply blood to the walls of both ventricles.
Circling circumflex

The circumflex artery supplies oxygenated blood to the lateral walls of the left ventricle, the left atrium and, in about half of the population, the SA node. In addition, the circumflex artery supplies blood to the left posterior fasciculus of the left bundle branch. This artery circles the left ventricle and provides blood to the ventricle’s posterior portion.

Circulation, guaranteed

When two or more arteries supply the same region, they usually connect through anastomoses, junctions that provide alternative routes of blood flow. This network of smaller arteries, called collateral circulation, provides blood to capillaries that directly feed the heart muscle. Collateral circulation commonly becomes so strong that even if major coronary arteries become clogged with plaque, collateral circulation can continue to supply blood to the heart.

Veins in the heart

The heart has veins just like other parts of the body. Cardiac veins collect deoxygenated blood from the capillaries of the myocardium. The cardiac veins join to form an enlarged vessel called the coronary sinus, which returns blood to the right atrium, where it continues through the circulation.

A look at cardiac physiology

This discussion of cardiac physiology includes descriptions of the cardiac cycle, how the cardiac muscle is innervated, how the depolarization-repolarization cycle operates, how impulses are conducted, and how abnormal impulses work. (See Events of the cardiac cycle, page 10.)

Cardiac cycle dynamics

During one heartbeat, ventricular diastole (relaxation) and ventricular systole (contraction) occur.

During diastole, the ventricles relax, the atria contract, and blood is forced through the open tricuspid and mitral valves. The aortic and pulmonic valves are closed.

During systole, the atria relax and fill with blood. The mitral and tricuspid valves are closed. Ventricular pressure rises, which
forces open the aortic and pulmonic valves. Then the ventricles contract, and blood flows through the circulatory system.

**Atrial kick**

The atrial contraction, or atrial kick, contributes about 30% of the cardiac output—the amount of blood pumped by the ventricles in 1 minute. (See *Quick facts about circulation.*) Certain arrhythmias, such as atrial fibrillation, can cause a loss of atrial kick and a subsequent drop in cardiac output. Tachycardia also affects cardiac output by shortening diastole and allowing less time for the ventricles to fill. Less filling time means less blood will be ejected during ventricular systole and less will be sent through the circulation.
A balancing act

The cardiac cycle produces cardiac output, which is the amount of blood the heart pumps in 1 minute. It’s measured by multiplying heart rate times stroke volume. (See Understanding preload, afterload, and contractility, page 12.) The term stroke volume refers to the amount of blood ejected with each ventricular contraction.

Normal cardiac output is 4 to 8 L/minute, depending on body size. The heart pumps only as much blood as the body requires. Three factors affect stroke volume—preload, afterload, and myocardial contractility. A balance of these three factors produces optimal cardiac output.

Preload

Preload is the stretching of muscle fibers in the ventricles and is determined by the pressure and amount of blood remaining in the left ventricle at the end of diastole.

Afterload

Afterload is the amount of pressure the left ventricle must work against to pump blood into the circulation. The greater this resistance, the more the heart works to pump out blood.

Contractility

Contractility is the ability of muscle cells to contract after depolarization. This ability depends on how much the muscle fibers are stretched at the end of diastole. Overstretching or understretching these fibers alters contractility and the amount of blood pumped out of the ventricles. To better understand this concept, picture trying to shoot a rubber band across the room. If you don’t stretch the rubber band enough, it won’t go far. If you stretch it too much, it will snap. However, if you stretch it just the right amount, it will go as far as you want it to.

Nerve supply to the heart

The heart is supplied by the two branches of the autonomic nervous system—the sympathetic, or adrenergic, and the parasympathetic, or cholinergic.

The sympathetic nervous system is basically the heart’s accelerator. Two sets of chemicals—norepinephrine and epinephrine—are highly influenced by this system. These chemicals increase heart rate, automaticity, AV conduction, and contractility.
Braking the heart

The parasympathetic nervous system, on the other hand, serves as the heart’s brakes. One of this system’s nerves, the vagus nerve, carries impulses that slow heart rate and the conduction of impulses through the AV node and ventricles. Stimulating this system releases the chemical acetylcholine, slowing the heart rate.

Understanding preload, afterload, and contractility

To better understand preload, afterload, and contractility, think of the heart as a balloon.

**Preload**

*Preload* is the passive stretching of muscle fibers in the ventricles. This stretching results from blood volume in the ventricles at end-diastole. According to Starling’s law, the more the heart muscles stretch during diastole, the more forcefully they contract during systole. Think of preload as the balloon stretching as air is blown into it. The more air the greater the stretch.

**Contractility**

*Contractility* refers to the inherent ability of the myocardium to contract normally. Contractility is influenced by preload. The greater the stretch the more forceful the contraction—or, the more air in the balloon, the greater the stretch, and the farther the balloon will fly when air is allowed to expel.

**Afterload**

*Afterload* refers to the pressure that the ventricular muscles must generate to overcome the higher pressure in the aorta to get the blood out of the heart. *Resistance* is the knot on the end of the balloon, which the balloon has to work against to get the air out.
A LOOK AT CARDIAC PHYSIOLOGY

The vagus nerve is stimulated by baroreceptors, specialized nerve cells in the aorta and the internal carotid arteries. Conditions that stimulate the baroreceptors also stimulate the vagus nerve.

For example, a stretching of the baroreceptors, which can occur during periods of hypertension or when applying pressure to the carotid artery, stimulates the receptors. In a maneuver called carotid sinus massage, baroreceptors in the carotid arteries are purposely activated in an effort to slow a rapid heart rate.

Transmission of electrical impulses

The heart can’t pump unless an electrical stimulus occurs first. Generation and transmission of electrical impulses depend on four characteristics of cardiac cells:
- **Automaticity** refers to a cell’s ability to spontaneously initiate an impulse. Pacemaker cells possess this ability.
- **Excitability** results from ion shifts across the cell membrane and indicates how well a cell responds to an electrical stimulus.
- **Conductivity** is the ability of a cell to transmit an electrical impulse to another cardiac cell.
- **Contractility** refers to how well the cell contracts after receiving a stimulus.

“De”-cycle and “re”-cycle

As impulses are transmitted, cardiac cells undergo cycles of depolarization and repolarization. (See Depolarization-repolarization cycle, page 14.) Cardiac cells at rest are considered polarized, meaning that no electrical activity takes place. Cell membranes separate different concentrations of ions, such as sodium and potassium, and create a more negative charge inside the cell. This is called the resting potential. After a stimulus occurs, ions cross the cell membrane and cause an action potential, or cell depolarization.

When a cell is fully depolarized, it attempts to return to its resting state in a process called repolarization. Electrical charges in the cell reverse and return to normal.

A cycle of depolarization-repolarization consists of five phases—0 through 4. The action potential is represented by a curve that shows voltage changes during the five phases. (See Action potential curve, page 15.)

Many phases of the curve

During phase 0, the cell receives an impulse from a neighboring cell and is depolarized. Phase 1 is marked by early, rapid repolarization. Phase 2, the plateau phase, is a period of slow repolarization.

During phases 1 and 2 and at the beginning of phase 3, the cardiac cell is said to be in its absolute refractory period. During
that period, no stimulus, no matter how strong, can excite the cell.

Phase 3, the rapid repolarization phase, occurs as the cell returns to its original state. During the last half of this phase, when the cell is in its relative refractory period, a very strong stimulus can depolarize it.

Phase 4 is the resting phase of the action potential. By the end of phase 4, the cell is ready for another stimulus.

All that electrical activity is represented on an electrocardiogram (ECG). Keep in mind that the ECG represents electrical activity only, not actual pumping of the heart.
Pathway through the heart

After depolarization and repolarization occur, the resulting electrical impulse travels through the heart along a pathway called the conduction system. (See The cardiac conduction system, page 16.) Impulses travel out from the SA node and through the inter-nodal tracts and Bachmann’s bundle to the AV node. From there, they travel through the bundle of His, the bundle branches, and lastly to the Purkinje fibers.

Setting the pace

The SA node is located in the upper right corner of the right atrium, where the superior vena cava joins the atrial tissue mass. It’s the heart’s main pacemaker, generating impulses 60 to 100 times per minute. When initiated, the impulses follow a specific path through the heart. They usually can’t flow backward because the cells can’t respond to a stimulus immediately after depolarization.
Bachmann’s bundle of nerves

Impulses from the SA node next travel through Bachmann’s bundle, tracts of tissue extending from the SA node to the left atrium. Impulses are thought to be transmitted throughout the right atrium through the anterior, middle, and posterior internodal tracts. Whether those tracts actually exist, however, is unclear. Impulse transmission through the right and left atria occurs so rapidly that the atria contract almost simultaneously.

AV: The slow node

The AV node, located in the inferior right atrium near the ostium of the coronary sinus, is responsible for delaying the impulses that reach it. Although the nodal tissue itself has no pacemaker cells, the tissue surrounding it (called junctional tissue) contains pacemaker cells that can fire at a rate of 40 to 60 times per minute.
The AV node’s main function is to delay impulses by 0.04 second to keep the ventricles from contracting too quickly. This delay allows the ventricles to complete their filling phase as the atria contract. It also allows the cardiac muscle to stretch to its fullest for peak cardiac output.

**Branch splitting**

The bundle of His, a tract of tissue extending into the ventricles next to the interventricular septum, resumes the rapid conduction of the impulse through the ventricles. The bundle eventually divides into the right and left bundle branches.

The right bundle branch extends down the right side of the interventricular septum and through the right ventricle. The left bundle branch extends down the left side of the interventricular septum and through the left ventricle.

The left bundle branch then splits into two branches, or fasciculi: the left anterior fasciculus, which extends through the anterior portion of the left ventricle, and the left posterior fasciculus, which runs through the lateral and posterior portions of the left ventricle. Impulses travel much faster down the left bundle branch (which feeds the larger, thicker-walled left ventricle) than the right bundle branch (which feeds the smaller, thinner-walled right ventricle).

The difference in the conduction speed allows both ventricles to contract simultaneously. The entire network of specialized nervous tissue that extends through the ventricles is known as the His-Purkinje system.

**Those perky Purkinje fibers**

Purkinje fibers extend from the bundle branches into the endocardium, deep into the myocardial tissue. These fibers conduct impulses rapidly through the muscle to assist in its depolarization and contraction.

Purkinje fibers can also serve as a pacemaker and are able to discharge impulses at a rate of 20 to 40 times per minute, sometimes even more slowly. (See *Pacemakers of the heart*, page 18.) Purkinje fibers usually aren’t activated as a pacemaker unless conduction through the bundle of His becomes blocked or a higher pacemaker (SA or AV node) doesn’t generate an impulse. (See *Pediatric pacemaker rates*, page 18.)
Abnormal impulses

Now that you understand how the heart generates a normal impulse, let's look at some causes of abnormal impulse conduction, including automaticity, backward conduction of impulses, reentry abnormalities, and ectopy.

When the heart goes on “manual”

Automaticity is a special characteristic of pacemaker cells that generates impulses automatically, without being stimulated to do so. If a cell's automaticity is increased or decreased, an arrhythmia can occur. Tachycardia, for example, is commonly caused by an increase in the automaticity of pacemaker cells below the SA node. Likewise, a decrease in automaticity of cells in the SA node can cause the development of bradycardia or an escape rhythm (a compensatory beat generated by a lower pacemaker site).

Out of synch

Impulses that begin below the AV node can be transmitted backward toward the atria. This backward, or retrograde, conduction usually takes longer than normal conduction and can cause the atria and ventricles to beat out of synch.

Coming back for more

Sometimes impulses cause depolarization twice in a row at a faster-than-normal rate. Such events are referred to as reentry events. In reentry, impulses are delayed long enough that cells
have time to repolarize. In these cases, the active impulse reenters the same area and produces another impulse.

Repeating itself

An injured pacemaker (or nonpacemaker) cell may partially depolarize, rather than fully depolarizing. Partial depolarization can lead to spontaneous or secondary depolarization, which involves repetitive ectopic firings called triggered activity.

The resultant depolarization is called afterdepolarization. Early afterdepolarization occurs before the cell is fully repolarized and can be caused by hypokalemia, slow pacing rates, or drug toxicity. If it occurs after the cell has been fully repolarized, it’s called delayed afterdepolarization. These problems can be caused by digoxin toxicity, hypercalcemia, or increased catecholamine release. Atrial or ventricular tachycardias may result. You’ll learn more about these and other arrhythmias in later chapters.

That’s a wrap!

Cardiac anatomy and physiology review

The heart’s valves
- **Tricuspid** — AV valve between the right atrium and right ventricle
- **Mitral** — AV valve between the left atrium and left ventricle
- **Aortic** — semilunar valve between the left ventricle and the aorta
- **Pulmonic** — semilunar valve between the right ventricle and the pulmonary artery

Blood flow
- Deoxygenated blood from the body returns to the right atrium and then flows to the right ventricle.
- The right ventricle pumps blood into the lungs where it’s oxygenated. Then the blood returns to the left atrium and flows to the left ventricle.
- Oxygenated blood is pumped to the aorta and the body by the left ventricle.

Coronary arteries and veins
- **Right coronary artery** — supplies blood to the right atrium and ventricle and part of the left ventricle
- **Left anterior descending artery** — supplies blood to the anterior wall of the left ventricle, interventricular septum, right bundle branch, and left anterior fasciculus of the left bundle branch
- **Circumflex artery** — supplies blood to the lateral walls of the left ventricle, left atrium, and left posterior fasciculus of the left bundle branch
- **Cardiac veins** — collect blood from the capillaries of the myocardium
- **Coronary sinus** — returns blood to the right atrium

(continued)
Cardiac anatomy and physiology review (continued)

Cardiac cycle dynamics
- **Atrial kick** — atrial contraction, contributing about 30% of the cardiac output
- **Cardiac output** — the amount of blood the heart pumps in 1 minute, calculated by multiplying heart rate times stroke volume
- **Stroke volume** — the amount of blood ejected with each ventricular contraction (it’s affected by preload, afterload, and contractility)
- **Preload** — the passive stretching exerted by blood on the ventricular muscle at the end of diastole
- **Afterload** — the amount of pressure the left ventricle must work against to pump blood into the aorta
- **Contractility** — the ability of the heart muscle cells to contract after depolarization

Conductivity — the ability of a cell to transmit an electrical impulse to another cardiac cell

Cardiac output — how well the cell contracts after receiving a stimulus.

Depolarization-repolarization cycle
Cardiac cells undergo the following cycles of depolarization and repolarization as impulses are transmitted:
- **Phase 0: Rapid depolarization** — the cell receives an impulse from a nearby cell and is depolarized
- **Phase 1: Early repolarization** — early rapid repolarization occurs
- **Phase 2: Plateau phase** — a period of slow repolarization occurs
- **Phase 3: Rapid repolarization** — the cell returns to its original state
- **Phase 4: Resting phase** — the cell rests and readies itself for another stimulus.

Innervation of the heart
Two branches of the autonomic nervous system supply the heart:
- **Sympathetic nervous system** — increases heart rate, automaticity, AV conduction, and contractility through release of norepinephrine and epinephrine
- **Parasympathetic nervous system** — vagus nerve stimulation reduces heart rate and AV conduction through release of acetylcholine.

Transmission of electrical impulses
Generation and transmission of electrical impulses depend on these cell characteristics:
- **Automaticity** — a cell’s ability to spontaneously initiate an impulse, such as found in pacemaker cells
- **Excitability** — how well a cell responds to an electrical stimulus

Intrinsic firing rates
- **SA node** — 60 to 100/minute
- **AV junction** — 40 to 60/minute
- **Purkinje fibers** — 20 to 40/minute

Abnormal impulses
- **Automaticity** — the ability of a cardiac cell to initiate an impulse on its own
- **Retrograde conduction** — impulses that are transmitted backward toward the atria
- **Reentry** — when an impulse follows a circular, rather than the normal, conduction path
Quick quiz

1. The term **automaticity** refers to the ability of a cell to:
   A. initiate an impulse on its own.
   B. send impulses in all directions.
   C. block impulses formed in areas other than the SA node.
   D. generate an impulse when stimulated.

   **Answer:** A. Automaticity, the ability of a cell to initiate an impulse on its own, is a unique characteristic of cardiac cells.

2. Parasympathetic stimulation of the heart results in:
   A. increased heart rate and decreased contractility.
   B. increased heart rate and faster AV conduction.
   C. decreased heart rate and slower AV conduction.
   D. decreased heart rate and increased contractility.

   **Answer:** C. Parasympathetic stimulation of the vagus nerve causes a decrease in heart rate and slowed AV conduction.

3. The normal pacemaker of the heart is the:
   A. SA node.
   B. AV node.
   C. bundle of His.
   D. Purkinje fibers.

   **Answer:** A. The SA node is the normal pacemaker of the heart, firing at an intrinsic rate of 60 to 100 times per minute.

4. The impulse delay produced by the AV node allows the atria to:
   A. repolarize simultaneously.
   B. contract before the ventricles.
   C. send impulses to the bundle of His.
   D. complete their filling.

   **Answer:** B. The 0.04-second delay allows the atria to contract and the ventricles to completely fill, which optimizes cardiac output.

5. The coronary arteries fill with blood during:
   A. atrial systole.
   B. atrial diastole.
   C. ventricular systole.
   D. ventricular diastole.

   **Answer:** D. The coronary arteries fill with blood when the ventricles are in diastole and filling with blood. The aortic valve is closed at that time, so it no longer blocks blood flow through the coronary ostium into the coronary arteries.
6. When stimulated, baroreceptors cause the heart rate to:
   A. increase.
   B. decrease.
   C. stay the same.
   D. become irregular.

Answer: B. Baroreceptors, when stimulated, cause the heart rate to decrease.

7. The two valves called the *semilunar valves* are the:
   A. pulmonic and tricuspid valves.
   B. pulmonic and aortic valves.
   C. aortic and mitral valves.
   D. aortic and tricuspid valves.

Answer: B. The pulmonic and aortic valves are semilunar.

8. Passive stretching exerted by blood on the ventricular muscle at the end of diastole is referred to as:
   A. preload.
   B. afterload.
   C. the atrial kick.
   D. cardiac output.

Answer: A. Preload is the passive stretching exerted by blood on the ventricular muscle at the end of diastole. It increases with an increase in venous return to the heart.

9. A patient admitted with an acute MI has a heart rate of 36 beats/minute. Based on this finding, which area of the heart is most likely serving as the pacemaker?
   A. SA node
   B. AV node
   C. Bachmann's bundle
   D. Purkinje fibers

Answer: D. If the SA node (which fires at a rate of 60 to 100 times per minute) and the AV node (which takes over firing at 40 to 60 times per minute) are damaged, the Purkinje fibers take over firing at a rate of 20 to 40 times per minute.

Scoring

⭐⭐⭐ If you answered all nine questions correctly, hooray! You’re a happenin’, heart-smart hipster.
⭐⭐ If you answered six to eight questions correctly, way to go! You’re clearly heart smart.
⭐ If you answered fewer than six questions correctly, take heart. Just review this chapter and you’ll be up to speed.
In this chapter, you’ll learn:

♦ the importance of ECGs in providing effective patient care
♦ the functions of leads and planes
♦ types of ECG monitoring systems
♦ proper techniques for applying electrodes, selecting leads, and obtaining rhythm strips
♦ solutions for cardiac-monitoring problems.

A look at ECG recordings

The heart’s electrical activity produces currents that radiate through the surrounding tissue to the skin. When electrodes are attached to the skin, they sense those electrical currents and transmit them to an ECG monitor. The currents are then transformed into waveforms that represent the heart’s depolarization-repolarization cycle.

You might remember that myocardial depolarization occurs when a wave of stimulation passes through the heart and stimulates the heart muscle to contract. Repolarization is the return to the resting state and results in relaxation.

An ECG shows the precise sequence of electrical events occurring in the cardiac cells throughout that process. It allows the nurse to monitor phases of myocardial contraction and to identify rhythm and conduction disturbances. A series of ECGs can be used as a baseline comparison to assess cardiac function.
Leads and planes

To understand electrocardiography, you need to understand leads and planes. Electrodes placed on the skin measure the direction of electrical current discharged by the heart. That current is then transformed into waveforms.

An ECG records information about those waveforms from different views or perspectives. Those perspectives are called leads and planes.

Take the lead

A lead provides a view of the heart’s electrical activity between one positive pole and one negative pole. Between the two poles lies an imaginary line representing the lead’s axis, a term that refers to the direction of the current moving through the heart.

The direction of the current affects the direction in which the waveform points on an ECG. (See Current direction and wave deflection.) When no electrical activity occurs or the activity is too weak to measure, the waveform looks like a straight line, called an isoelectric waveform.

Current direction and wave deflection

This illustration shows possible directions of electrical current, or depolarization, on a lead. The direction of the electrical current determines the upward or downward deflection of an electrocardiogram waveform.
Plane and simple

The term *plane* refers to a cross-sectional perspective of the heart’s electrical activity. The frontal plane, a vertical cut through the middle of the heart, provides an anterior-to-posterior view of electrical activity. The horizontal plane, a transverse cut through the middle of the heart, provides either a superior or an inferior view.

Types of ECGs

The two types of ECG recordings are the 12-lead ECG and a rhythm strip. Both types give valuable information about heart function.

A dozen views

A 12-lead ECG records information from 12 different views of the heart and provides a complete picture of electrical activity. These 12 views are obtained by placing electrodes on the patient’s limbs and chest. The limb leads and the chest, or precordial, leads reflect information from the different planes of the heart.

Different leads provide different information. The six limb leads—I, II, III, augmented vector right (aVR), augmented vector left (aVL), and augmented vector foot (aVF)—provide information about the heart’s frontal (vertical) plane. Leads I, II, and III require a negative and positive electrode for monitoring, which makes those leads bipolar. The augmented leads record information from one lead and are called *unipolar*.

The six precordial or V leads—V1, V2, V3, V4, V5, and V6—provide information about the heart’s horizontal plane. Like the augmented leads, the precordial leads are also unipolar, requiring only a single electrode. The opposing pole of those leads is the center of the heart as calculated by the ECG.

Just one view

A rhythm strip, which can be used to monitor cardiac status, provides information about the heart’s electrical activity from one or more leads simultaneously. Chest electrodes pick up the heart’s electrical activity for display on the monitor. The monitor also displays heart rate and other measurements and allows for printing strips of cardiac rhythms.

Commonly monitored leads include the bipolar leads I, II, III, V1, V6, MCL1, and MCL6. The initials MCL stand for modified chest lead. These leads are similar to the unipolar leads V1 and V6 of the 12-lead ECG. MCL1 and MCL6, however, are bipolar leads.
Monitoring ECGs

The type of ECG monitoring system you’ll use—hardwire monitoring or telemetry—depends on the patient’s condition and where you work. Let’s look at each system.

Hardwire basics

With hardwire monitoring, the electrodes are connected directly to the cardiac monitor. Most hardwire monitors are mounted permanently on a shelf or wall near the patient’s bed. Some monitors are mounted on an I.V. pole for portability, and some may include a defibrillator.

The monitor provides a continuous cardiac rhythm display and transmits the ECG tracing to a console at the nurses’ station. Both the monitor and the console have alarms and can print rhythm strips. Hardwire monitors can also track pulse oximetry, blood pressure, hemodynamic measurements, and other parameters through various attachments to the patient.

Some drawbacks

Hardwire monitoring is generally used in intensive care units and emergency departments because it permits continuous observation of one or more patients from more than one area in the unit. However, this type of monitoring does have drawbacks, among them:

• limited patient mobility because the patient is tethered to a monitor by a cable
• patient discomfort because the electrodes and cables are attached to the chest
• possibility of lead disconnection and loss of cardiac monitoring when the patient moves.

Portable points

Telemetry monitoring is generally used in step-down units and medical-surgical units where patients are permitted more activity. With telemetry monitoring, the patient carries a small, battery-powered transmitter that sends electrical signals to another location, where the signals are displayed on a monitor screen. This type of ECG monitoring frees the patient from cumbersome wires and cables associated with hardwire monitoring.

Telemetry monitoring still requires skin electrodes to be placed on the patient’s chest. Each electrode is connected by a thin wire to a small transmitter box carried in a pocket or pouch. It’s especially useful for detecting arrhythmias that occur with activity or stressful situations. Most systems, however, can monitor heart rate and rhythm only.
All about leads

Electrode placement is different for each lead, and different leads provide different views of the heart. A lead may be chosen to highlight a particular part of the ECG complex or the electrical events of a specific cardiac cycle.

Although leads II, V₁, and V₆ are among the most commonly used leads for monitoring, you should adjust the leads according to the patient’s condition. If your monitoring system has the capability, you may also monitor the patient in more than one lead.

Going to ground

All bipolar leads have a third electrode, known as the ground, which is placed on the chest to prevent electrical interference from appearing on the ECG recording.

Heeeere’s lead I

Lead I provides a view of the heart that shows current moving from right to left. Because current flows from negative to positive, the positive electrode for this lead is placed on the left arm or on the left side of the chest; the negative electrode is placed on the right arm. Lead I produces a positive deflection on ECG tracings and is helpful in monitoring atrial rhythms and hemiblocks.

Introducing lead II

Lead II produces a positive deflection. Place the positive electrode on the patient’s left leg and the negative electrode on the right arm. For continuous monitoring, place the electrodes on the torso for convenience, with the positive electrode below the lowest palpable rib at the left midclavicular line and the negative electrode below the right clavicle. The current travels down and to the left in this lead. Lead II tends to produce a positive, high-voltage deflection, resulting in tall P, R, and T waves. This lead is commonly used for routine monitoring and is useful for detecting sinus node and atrial arrhythmias.

Next up, lead III

Lead III produces a positive deflection. The positive electrode is placed on the left leg; the negative electrode, on the left arm. Along with lead II, this lead is useful for detecting changes associated with an inferior wall myocardial infarction.

The axes of the three bipolar limb leads—I, II, and III—form a triangle around the heart and provide a frontal plane view of the heart. (See Einthoven’s triangle, page 28.)
**Einthoven's triangle**

When setting up standard limb leads, you’ll place electrodes in positions commonly referred to as *Einthoven’s triangle*, shown here. The electrodes for leads I, II, and III are about equidistant from the heart and form an equilateral triangle.

**Axes**

The axis of lead I extends from shoulder to shoulder, with the right-arm electrode being the negative electrode and the left-arm electrode positive. The axis of lead II runs from the negative right-arm electrode to the positive left-leg electrode. The axis of lead III extends from the negative left-arm electrode to the positive left-leg electrode.

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**The “a” leads**

Leads aVR, aVL, and aVF are called *augmented leads* because the small waveforms that normally would appear from these unipolar leads are enhanced by the ECG. (See *Augmented leads*.) The “a” stands for “augmented,” and “R, L, and F” stand for the positive electrode position of the lead.

In lead aVR, the positive electrode is placed on the right arm (hence, the R) and produces a negative deflection because the heart’s electrical activity moves away from the lead. In lead aVL, the positive electrode is on the left arm and produces a positive deflection on the ECG. In lead aVF, the positive electrode is on the left leg (despite the name aVF) and produces a positive deflection. These three limb leads also provide a view of the heart’s frontal plane.

**The preeminent precordials**

The six unipolar precordial leads are placed in sequence across the chest and provide a view of the heart’s horizontal plane. (See *Precordial views*, page 30.) These leads include:

*Placed in sequence across the chest, precordial leads V₁ through V₆ provide a view of the heart’s horizontal plane.*
**Augmented leads**

Leads aVR, aVL, and aVF are called *augmented leads*. They measure electrical activity between one limb and a single electrode. Lead aVR provides no specific view of the heart. Lead aVL shows electrical activity coming from the heart’s lateral wall. Lead aVF shows electrical activity coming from the heart’s inferior wall.

- **Lead V1**—The precordial lead V1 electrode is placed on the right side of the sternum at the fourth intercostal rib space. This lead corresponds to the modified chest lead MCL1 and shows the P wave, QRS complex, and ST segment particularly well. It helps to distinguish between right and left ventricular ectopic beats that result from myocardial irritation or other cardiac stimulation outside the normal conduction system. Lead V1 is also useful in monitoring ventricular arrhythmias, ST-segment changes, and bundle-branch blocks.
- **Lead V2**—Lead V2 is placed at the left of the sternum at the fourth intercostal rib space.
- **Lead V3**—Lead V3 goes between V2 and V4. Leads V1, V2, and V3 are biphasic, with both positive and negative deflections. Leads V2 and V3 can be used to detect ST-segment elevation.
- **Lead V4**—Lead V4 is placed at the fifth intercostal space at the midclavicular line and produces a biphasic waveform.
- **Lead V5**—Lead V5 is placed at the fifth intercostal space at the anterior axillary line. It produces a positive deflection on the ECG and, along with V4, can show changes in the ST segment or T wave.
- **Lead V6**—Lead V6, the last of the precordial leads, is placed level with V4 at the midaxillary line. This lead produces a positive deflection on the ECG.
OBTAINING A RHYTHM STRIP

The modest modified lead

MCL₁ is similar to lead V₁ on the 12-lead ECG and is created by placing the negative electrode on the left upper chest, the positive electrode on the right side of the sternum at the fourth intercostal space, and the ground electrode usually on the right upper chest below the clavicle.

When the positive electrode is on the right side of the heart and the electrical current travels toward the left ventricle, the
waveform has a negative deflection. As a result, ectopic or abnormal beats deflect in a positive direction.

You can use this lead to monitor premature ventricular contractions and to distinguish different types of tachycardia, such as ventricular tachycardia and supraventricular tachycardia. Lead MCL₄ can also be used to assess bundle-branch defects and P-wave changes and to confirm pacemaker wire placement.

A positive option

MCL₆ may be used as an alternative to MCL₁. Like MCL₁ it monitors ventricular conduction changes. The positive lead in MCL₆ is placed in the same location as its equivalent, lead V₆. The positive electrode is placed at the fifth intercostal space at the midaxillary line, the negative electrode below the left shoulder, and the ground below the right shoulder.

Electrode basics

A three- or five-electrode (or leadwire) system may be used for cardiac monitoring. (See Leadwire systems, page 32.) Both systems use a ground electrode to prevent accidental electrical shock to the patient.

A three-electrode system has one positive electrode, one negative electrode, and a ground.

The popular five-electrode system uses an exploratory chest lead to monitor any six modified chest leads as well as the standard limb leads. (See Using a five-leadwire system, page 33.) This system uses standardized chest placement. Wires that attach to the electrodes are usually color-coded to help you to place them correctly on the patient’s chest.

One newer application of bedside cardiac monitoring is a reduced lead continuous 12-lead ECG system (EASI system), which uses an advanced algorithm and only five electrodes uniquely placed on the torso to derive a 12-lead ECG. The system allows all 12 leads to be simultaneously displayed and recorded. (See Understanding the EASI system, page 34.)

How to apply electrodes

Before you attach electrodes to your patient, make sure he knows you’re monitoring his heart rate and rhythm, not controlling them. Tell him not to become upset if he hears an alarm during the procedure; it probably just means a leadwire has come loose.

Explain the electrode placement procedure to the patient, provide privacy, and wash your hands. Expose the patient’s chest and select electrode sites for the chosen lead. Choose sites over (Text continues on page 34.)
**Leadwire systems**

This chart shows the correct electrode positions for some of the leads you’ll use most often — the five-leadwire, three-leadwire, and telemetry systems. The chart uses the abbreviations RA for the right arm, LA for the left arm, RL for the right leg, LL for the left leg, C for the chest, and G for the ground.

**Electrode positions**

In the three- and the five-leadwire systems, electrode positions for one lead may be identical to those for another lead. When that happens, change the lead selector switch to the setting that corresponds to the lead you want. In some cases, you’ll need to reposition the electrodes.

**Telemetry**

In a telemetry monitoring system, you can create the same leads as the other systems with just two electrodes and a ground wire.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lead I</th>
<th>Lead II</th>
<th>Lead III</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image1" alt="Five-leadwire system" /></td>
<td><img src="image2" alt="Three-leadwire system" /></td>
<td><img src="image3" alt="Telemetry system" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image4" alt="Five-leadwire system" /></td>
<td><img src="image5" alt="Three-leadwire system" /></td>
<td><img src="image6" alt="Telemetry system" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image7" alt="Five-leadwire system" /></td>
<td><img src="image8" alt="Three-leadwire system" /></td>
<td><img src="image9" alt="Telemetry system" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These are the electrode positions you’ll use most often.
Leadwire systems (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Five-leadwire system</th>
<th>Three-leadwire system</th>
<th>Telemetry system</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Lead MCL₁</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image1" alt="Diagram" /></td>
<td><img src="image2" alt="Diagram" /></td>
<td><img src="image3" alt="Diagram" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Lead MCL₆</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image4" alt="Diagram" /></td>
<td><img src="image5" alt="Diagram" /></td>
<td><img src="image6" alt="Diagram" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Using a five-leadwire system

This illustration shows the correct placement of the leadwires for a five-leadwire system. The chest electrode shown is located in the V₄ position, but you can place it in any of the chest-lead positions. The electrodes are color-coded as follows.

- **White**: right arm (RA)
- **Black**: left arm (LA)
- **Green**: right leg (RL)
- **Red**: left leg (LL)
- **Brown**: chest (C)
OBTAINING A RHYTHM STRIP

Understanding the EASI system

The five-lead EASI (reduced lead continuous 12-lead electrocardiogram [ECG]) configuration gives a three-dimensional view of the electrical activity of the heart from the frontal, horizontal, and sagittal planes. This provides 12 leads of information. A mathematical calculation in the electronics of the monitoring system is applied to the information, creating a derived 12-lead ECG.

Placement of the electrodes for the EASI system includes:

- **E lead:** lower part of the sternum at the level of the fifth intercostal space
- **A lead:** left midaxillary line at the level of the fifth intercostal space
- **S lead:** upper part of the sternum
- **I lead:** right midaxillary line at the level of the fifth intercostal space
- **Ground:** anywhere on the torso.

Prepare the skin

Next, prepare the patient’s skin. To begin, wash the patient’s chest with soap and water and then dry it thoroughly. Because hair may interfere with electrical contact, clip dense hair with clippers or scissors. Then use the special rough patch on the back of the electrode, a dry washcloth, or a gauze pad to briskly rub each site soft tissues or close to bone, not over bony prominences, thick muscles, or skin folds. Those areas can produce ECG artifacts—waveforms not produced by the heart’s electrical activity.
until the skin reddens. Make sure that you don’t damage or break the skin. Brisk scrubbing helps to remove dead skin cells and improves electrical contact.

If the patient has oily skin, clean each site with an alcohol pad and let it air-dry. This ensures proper adhesion and prevents the alcohol from becoming trapped beneath the electrode, which can irritate the skin and cause skin breakdown.

**Stick it to me**

To apply the electrodes, remove the backing and make sure each pregelled electrode is still moist. If an electrode has become dry, discard it and select another. A dry electrode decreases electrical contact and interferes with waveforms.

Apply one electrode to each prepared site using this method:
- Press one side of the electrode against the patient’s skin, pull gently, and then press the opposite side of the electrode against the skin.
- Using two fingers, press the adhesive edge around the outside of the electrode to the patient’s chest. This fixes the gel and stabilizes the electrode.
- Repeat this procedure for each electrode.
- Every 24 hours, remove the electrodes, assess the patient’s skin, and put new electrodes in place.

**Clip, clip, snap, snap**

You’ll also need to attach leadwires or cable connections to the monitor and attach leadwires to the electrodes. Leadwires may clip on or, more commonly, snap on. (See **Clip-on and snap-on leadwires**.) If you’re using the snap-on type, attach the electrode to the leadwire just before applying it to the patient’s chest. Keep in mind that you may lose electrode contact if you press down to apply the leadwire.

When you use a clip-on leadwire, apply it after the electrode has been secured to the patient’s skin. That way, applying the clip won’t interfere with the electrode’s contact with the skin.

**Observing the cardiac rhythm**

After the electrodes are in proper position, the monitor is on, and the necessary cables are attached, observe the screen. You should see the patient’s ECG waveform. Although some monitoring systems allow you to make adjustments by touching the screen, most require you to manipulate buttons. If the waveform appears too large or too small, change the size by adjusting the gain control. If the waveform appears too high or too low on the screen, adjust the position.
verify that the monitor detects each heartbeat by comparing the patient’s apical rate with the rate displayed on the monitor. Set the upper and lower limits of the heart rate according to your facility’s policy and the patient’s condition. Heart rate alarms are generally set 10 to 20 beats per minute higher and lower than the patient’s heart rate.

Monitors with arrhythmia detectors generate a rhythm strip automatically whenever the alarm goes off. You can obtain other views of your patient’s cardiac rhythm by selecting different leads. You can select leads with the lead selector button or switch.

**Printing it out**

To get a printout of the patient’s cardiac rhythm, press the record control on the monitor. The ECG strip will be printed at the central console. Some systems print the rhythm from a recorder box on the monitor itself.

Most monitor recording systems print the date, time, and the patient’s name and identification number; however, if the monitor you’re using can’t do this, label the rhythm strip with the date, time, patient’s name, identification number and rhythm interpretation. Add any appropriate clinical information to the ECG strip, such as any medication administered, presence of chest pain, or patient activity at the time of the recording. Be sure to place the rhythm strip in the appropriate section of the patient’s medical record.

**It’s all on paper**

Waveforms produced by the heart’s electrical current are recorded on graphed ECG paper by a stylus. ECG paper consists of horizontal and vertical lines forming a grid. A piece of ECG paper is called an ECG strip or tracing. (See ECG grid.)

![ECG grid](image)
The horizontal axis of the ECG strip represents time. Each small block equals 0.04 second, and five small blocks form a large block, which equals 0.2 second. This time increment is determined by multiplying 0.04 second (for one small block) by 5, the number of small blocks that compose a large block. Five large blocks equal 1 second (5 × 0.2). When measuring or calculating a patient’s heart rate, a 6-second strip consisting of 30 large blocks is usually used.

The ECG strip’s vertical axis measures amplitude in millimeters (mm) or electrical voltage in millivolts (mV). Each small block represents 1 mm or 0.1 mV; each large block, 5 mm or 0.5 mV. To determine the amplitude of a wave, segment, or interval, count the number of small blocks from the baseline to the highest or lowest point of the wave, segment, or interval.

**Monitor problems**

For optimal cardiac monitoring, you need to recognize problems that can interfere with obtaining a reliable ECG recording. (See *Troubleshooting monitor problems*, pages 38 and 39.) Causes of interference include artifact from patient movement and poorly placed or poorly functioning equipment.

**Artifact**

Artifact, also called *waveform interference*, may be seen with excessive movement (somatic tremor). The baseline of the ECG appears wavy, bumpy, or tremulous. Dry electrodes may also cause this problem due to poor contact.

**Interference**

Electrical interference, also called *60-cycle interference*, is caused by electrical power leakage. It may also occur due to interference from other room equipment or improperly grounded equipment. As a result, the lost current pulses at a rate of 60 cycles per second. This interference appears on the ECG as a baseline that’s thick and unreadable.

**Wandering baseline**

A wandering baseline undulates, meaning that all waveforms are present but the baseline isn’t stationary. Movement of the chest wall during respiration, poor electrode placement, or poor electrode contact usually causes this problem.

**Faulty equipment**

Faulty equipment, such as broken leadwires and cables, can also cause monitoring problems. Excessively worn equipment
Mixed signals

Troubleshooting monitor problems

This chart shows several ECG monitoring problems, along with their causes and possible solutions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What you see</th>
<th>What might cause it</th>
<th>What to do about it</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Artifact (waveform interference)</td>
<td>• Patient experiencing seizures, chills, or anxiety</td>
<td>• If the patient is having a seizure, notify the practitioner and intervene as ordered.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Dirty or corroded connections</td>
<td>• Keep the patient warm and encourage him to relax.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Improper electrode application</td>
<td>• Replace dirty or corroded wires.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Short circuit in leadwires or cable</td>
<td>• Check the electrodes and reapply them if needed. Clean the patient's skin well because skin oils and dead skin cells inhibit conduction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Electrical interference from other electrical equipment in the room</td>
<td>• Check the electrode gel. If the gel is dry, apply new electrodes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Static electricity interference from inadequate room humidity</td>
<td>• Replace broken equipment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>False high-rate alarm</td>
<td>• Gain setting too high, particularly with MCL1 setting</td>
<td>• Make sure all electrical equipment is attached to a common ground. Check all three-pronged plugs to ensure that none of the prongs are loose. Notify the biomedical department.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weak signals</td>
<td>• Improper electrode application</td>
<td>• Assess the patient for signs and symptoms of hyperkalemia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• QRS complex too small to register</td>
<td>• Reset gain.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Wire or cable failure</td>
<td>• Reapply the electrodes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Reset gain so that the height of the complex is greater than 1 mV.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Try monitoring the patient on another lead.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Replace any faulty wires or cables.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Troubleshooting monitor problems (continued)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What you see</th>
<th>What might cause it</th>
<th>What to do about it</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Wandering baseline**      | • Patient restless  
• Chest wall movement during respiration  
• Improper electrode application; electrode positioned over bone | • Encourage the patient to relax.  
• Make sure that tension on the cable isn’t pulling the electrode away from the patient’s body.  
• Reposition improperly placed electrodes. |
| **Fuzzy baseline (electrical interference)** | • Electrical interference from other equipment in the room  
• Improper grounding of the patient’s bed  
• Electrode malfunction | • Ensure that all electrical equipment is attached to a common ground.  
• Check all three-pronged plugs to make sure none of the prongs are loose.  
• Ensure that the bed ground is attached to the room’s common ground.  
• Replace the electrodes. |
| **Baseline (no waveform)**  | • Improper electrode placement (perpendicular to axis of heart)  
• Electrode disconnected  
• Dry electrode gel  
• Wire or cable failure | • Reposition improperly placed electrodes.  
• Check if electrodes are disconnected. Reapply them as necessary.  
• Check electrode gel. If the gel is dry, apply new electrodes.  
• Replace faulty wires or cables. |

Worn equipment can cause problems—including a possible shock for the patient.

can cause improper grounding, putting the patient at risk for accidental shock.

Be aware that some types of artifact resemble arrhythmias, and the monitor will interpret them as such. For example, the monitor may sense a small movement, such as the patient brushing his teeth, as a potentially lethal ventricular tachycardia. So remember to treat the patient, not the monitor. The more familiar you become with your unit’s monitoring system—and with your patient—the more quickly you can recognize and interpret problems and act appropriately.
Obtaining a rhythm strip review

**Leads and planes**
- A *lead* provides a view of the heart’s electrical activity between a positive and negative pole.
  - When electrical current travels toward the negative pole, the waveform deflects mostly downward.
  - When the current flows toward the positive pole, the waveform deflects mostly upward.
- A *plane* refers to a cross-section view of the electrical activity of the heart.
  - Frontal plane, a vertical cut through the middle of the heart, provides an anterior-posterior view.
  - Horizontal plane, a transverse cut through the middle of the heart, provides a superior or inferior view.

**Types of ECGs**
- *12-lead ECG* records electrical activity from 12 views of the heart.
- *Single-lead or dual-lead monitoring* provides continuous cardiac monitoring.

**12-lead ECG**
- Six limb leads provide information about the heart’s frontal (vertical) plane.
- Bipolar (leads I, II, and III) require a negative and positive electrode for monitoring.
- Unipolar (leads aVR, aVL, and aVF) record information from one lead and require only one electrode.
- The six precordial leads (leads V1 through V6) provide information about the heart’s horizontal plane.

**Precordial leads**
- Lead V1
  - Biphasic
  - Distinguishes between right and left ventricular ectopic beats
  - Monitors ventricular arrhythmias, ST-segment changes, and bundle-branch blocks
- Leads V2 and V3
  - Biphasic
  - Monitors ST-segment elevation
- Lead V4
  - Produces a biphasic waveform
  - Monitors ST-segment and T-wave changes
- Lead V5
  - Produces a positive deflection on the ECG
  - Monitors ST-segment or T-wave changes (when used with lead V4)
- Lead V6
  - Produces a positive deflection on the ECG
  - Monitors bundle-branch blocks

**Modified leads**
- Lead MCL1
  - Similar to V1
  - Assesses QRS-complex arrhythmias, P-wave changes, and bundle-branch defects
  - Monitors premature ventricular contractions
  - Distinguishes different types of tachycardia
- Lead MCL6
  - Similar to V6
  - Monitors ventricular conduction changes

**Electrode configurations**
- *Three-electrode system* uses one positive electrode, one negative electrode, and a ground.
- *Five-electrode system* uses an exploratory chest lead to monitor modified chest or standard limb leads.
Quick quiz

1. On ECG graph paper, the horizontal axis measures:
   A. time.
   B. speed.
   C. voltage.
   D. amplitude.

   Answer: A. The horizontal axis measures time and is recorded in increments of 0.04 second for each small box.

2. On ECG graph paper, the vertical axis measures:
   A. time.
   B. speed.
   C. voltage.
   D. amplitude.

   Answer: C. The vertical axis measures voltage by the height of a waveform.

3. A biphasic deflection will occur on an ECG if the electrical current is traveling in a direction:
   A. posterior to the positive electrode.
   B. perpendicular to the positive electrode.
   C. superior to the positive electrode.
   D. anterior to the positive electrode.
Answer: B. A current traveling in a route perpendicular to the positive electrode will generate a biphasic wave, partially above and below the isoelectric line.

4. If a lead comes off the patient’s chest, the waveform:
   A. will appear much larger on the monitor.
   B. will appear much smaller on the monitor.
   C. will appear to wander on the monitor.
   D. won’t be seen at all on the monitor.

Answer: D. Leadwire disconnection will stop the monitoring process, and the waveform won’t be seen on the monitor.

5. To monitor lead II, you would place the:
   A. positive electrode below the lowest palpable rib at the left midclavicular line and the negative electrode below the right clavicle.
   B. positive electrode below the right clavicle at the midline and the negative electrode below the left clavicle at the midline.
   C. positive electrode below the left clavicle and the negative electrode below the right clavicle at the midclavicular line.
   D. positive electrode below the lowest palpable rib at the right midclavicular line and the negative electrode below the left clavicle.

Answer: A. This electrode position is the proper one for monitoring in lead II.

Scoring

⭐⭐⭐ If you answered all five questions correctly, superb! We’re ready to go out on a limb lead for you.

⭐⭐ If you answered four questions correctly, great! We hardly need to monitor your progress.

⭐ If you answered fewer than four questions correctly, keep at it! A review of the chapter can get your current flowing in the right direction.
A look at an ECG complex

An ECG complex represents the electrical events occurring in one cardiac cycle. A complex consists of five waveforms labeled with the letters P, Q, R, S, and T. The middle three letters —Q, R, and S—are referred to as a unit, the QRS complex. ECG tracings represent the conduction of electrical impulses from the atria to the ventricles. (See Normal ECG, page 44.)

The P wave

The P wave is the first component of a normal ECG waveform. It represents atrial depolarization—conduction of an electrical impulse through the atria. When evaluating a P wave, look closely at its characteristics, especially its location, configuration, and deflection. A normal P wave has the following characteristics:

- location—precedes the QRS complex
- amplitude—2 to 3 mm high
- duration—0.06 to 0.12 second
- configuration—usually rounded and upright
• deflection—positive or upright in leads I, II, aV\textsubscript{F}, and V\textsubscript{2} to V\textsubscript{6}; usually positive but variable in leads III and aV\textsubscript{L}; negative or inverted in lead aV\textsubscript{R}; biphasic or variable in lead V\textsubscript{1}.

If the deflection and configuration of a P wave are normal—for example, if the P wave is upright in lead II and is rounded and smooth—and if the P wave precedes each QRS complex, you can assume that this electrical impulse originated in the sinoatrial (SA) node. The atria start to contract partway through the P wave, but you won’t see this on the ECG. Remember, the ECG records electrical activity only, not mechanical activity or contraction.
The odd Ps

Peaked, notched, or enlarged P waves may represent atrial hypertrophy or enlargement associated with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, pulmonary emboli, valvular disease, or heart failure. Inverted P waves may signify retrograde or reverse conduction from the atrioventricular (AV) junction toward the atria. When an upright sinus P wave becomes inverted, consider retrograde or reverse conduction as possible conditions.

Varying P waves indicate that the impulse may be coming from different sites, as with a wandering pacemaker rhythm, irritable atrial tissue, or damage near the SA node. Absent P waves may signify conduction by a route other than the SA node, as with a junctional or atrial fibrillation rhythm.

The PR interval

The PR interval tracks the atrial impulse from the atria through the AV node, bundle of His, and right and left bundle branches. When evaluating a PR interval, look especially at its duration. Changes in the PR interval indicate an altered impulse formation or a conduction delay, as seen in AV block. A normal PR interval has the following characteristics (amplitude, configuration, and deflection aren’t measured):

- location—from the beginning of the P wave to the beginning of the QRS complex
- duration—0.12 to 0.20 second.

These characteristics are different for pediatric patients. (See Pediatric rates and intervals, page 46.)

The short and long of it

Short PR intervals (less than 0.12 second) indicate that the impulse originated somewhere other than the SA node. This variation is associated with junctional arrhythmias and preexcitation syndromes. Prolonged PR intervals (greater than 0.20 second) may represent a conduction delay through the atria or AV junction due to digoxin toxicity or heart block—slowing related to ischemia or conduction tissue disease.

The QRS complex

The QRS complex follows the P wave and represents depolarization of the ventricles. Immediately after the ventricles depolarize, as represented by the QRS complex, they contract. That contraction ejects blood from the ventricles and pumps it through the arteries, creating a pulse.
INTERPRETING A RHYTHM STRIP

Not necessarily mechanical
Whenever you’re monitoring cardiac rhythm, remember that the waveform you see represents the heart’s electrical activity only. It doesn’t guarantee a mechanical contraction of the heart and a subsequent pulse. The contraction could be weak, as happens with premature ventricular contractions, or absent, as happens with pulseless electrical activity. So before you treat the strip, check the patient.

It’s all normal
Pay special attention to the duration and configuration when evaluating a QRS complex. A normal complex has the following characteristics:
- location—follows the PR interval
- amplitude—5 to 30 mm high but differs for each lead used
- duration—0.06 to 0.10 second, or half of the PR interval. Duration is measured from the beginning of the Q wave to the end of
A LOOK AT AN ECG COMPLEX

QRS waveform variety

The illustrations below show the various configurations of QRS complexes. When documenting the QRS complex, use uppercase letters to indicate a wave with a normal or high amplitude (greater than 5 mm) and lowercase letters to indicate a wave with a low amplitude (less than 5 mm). In some instances, a second R wave may appear in a QRS complex. This is called R’.

the S wave or from the beginning of the R wave if the Q wave is absent.
- configuration—consists of the Q wave (the first negative deflection after the P wave), the R wave (the first positive deflection after the P wave or the Q wave), and the S wave (the first negative deflection after the R wave). You may not always see all three waves. The ventricles depolarize quickly, minimizing contact time between the stylus and the ECG paper, so the QRS complex typically appears thinner than other ECG components. It may also look different in each lead. (See QRS waveform variety.)
- deflection—positive in leads I, II, III, aV_L, aV_F, and V_4 to V_6 and negative in leads aV_R and V_1 to V_3.

Crucial I.D.

Remember that the QRS complex represents intraventricular conduction time. That’s why identifying and correctly interpreting it is so crucial. If no P wave appears with the QRS complex, then the impulse may have originated in the ventricles, indicating a ventricular arrhythmia. (See Older adult ECGs.)

Deep and wide

Deep, wide Q waves may represent myocardial infarction. In this case, the Q-wave amplitude is 25% of the R-wave amplitude, or the duration of the Q wave is 0.04 second or more. A notched R

Older adult ECGs

Always keep the patient’s age in mind when interpreting the ECG. ECG changes in the older adult include increased PR, QRS, and QT intervals, decreased amplitude of the QRS complex, and a shift of the QRS axis to the left.
wave may signify a bundle-branch block. A widened QRS complex (greater than 0.12 second) may signify a ventricular conduction delay. A missing QRS complex may indicate AV block or ventricular standstill.

The ST segment

The ST segment represents the end of ventricular conduction or depolarization and the beginning of ventricular recovery or repolarization. The point that marks the end of the QRS complex and the beginning of the ST segment is known as the *J point*.

Normal ST

Pay special attention to the deflection of an ST segment. A normal ST segment has the following characteristics (amplitude, duration, and configuration aren’t observed):

- **location**—extends from the S wave to the beginning of the T wave
- **deflection**—usually isoelectric (neither positive nor negative); may vary from –0.5 to +1 mm in some precordial leads.

Not so normal ST

A change in the ST segment may indicate myocardial damage. An ST segment may become either elevated or depressed. (See *Changes in the ST segment*.)

Changes in the ST segment

Closely monitoring the ST segment on a patient’s ECG can help you detect myocardial ischemia or injury before infarction develops.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ST-segment depression</th>
<th>ST-segment elevation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>An ST segment is considered depressed when it’s 0.5 mm or more below the baseline. A depressed ST segment may indicate myocardial ischemia or digoxin toxicity.</td>
<td>An ST segment is considered elevated when it’s 1 mm or more above the baseline. An elevated ST segment may indicate myocardial injury.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The T wave

The T wave represents ventricular recovery or repolarization. When evaluating a T wave, look at the amplitude, configuration, and deflection. Normal T waves have the following characteristics (duration isn’t measured):

- location—follows the S wave
- amplitude—0.5 mm in leads I, II, and III and up to 10 mm in the precordial leads
- configuration—typically round and smooth
- deflection—usually upright in leads I, II, and V3 to V6; inverted in lead aVR; variable in all other leads.

Why is that T so bumpy?

The T wave’s peak represents the relative refractory period of ventricular repolarization, a period during which cells are especially vulnerable to extra stimuli. Bumps in a T wave may indicate that a P wave is hidden in it. If a P wave is hidden, atrial depolarization has occurred, the impulse having originated at a site above the ventricles.

Tall, inverted, or pointy Ts

Tall, peaked, or tented T waves indicate myocardial injury or hyperkalemia. Inverted T waves in leads I, II, or V3 through V6 may represent myocardial ischemia. Heavily notched or pointed T waves in an adult may mean pericarditis.

The QT interval

The QT interval measures ventricular depolarization and repolarization. The length of the QT interval varies according to heart rate. The faster the heart rate, the shorter the QT interval. When checking the QT interval, look closely at the duration.

A normal QT interval has the following characteristics (amplitude, configuration, and deflection aren’t observed):

- location—extends from the beginning of the QRS complex to the end of the T wave
- duration—varies according to age, sex, and heart rate; usually lasts from 0.36 to 0.44 second; shouldn’t be greater than half the distance between consecutive R waves when the rhythm is regular.

The importance of QT

The QT interval shows the time needed for the ventricular depolarization-repolarization cycle. An abnormality in duration may indicate myocardial problems. Prolonged QT intervals indicate that the relative refractory period is longer. A prolonged QT
INTERPRETING A RHYTHM STRIP

Drugs that increase the QT interval

This chart lists drugs that have been shown to increase the QT interval, which increases the patient’s risk of developing torsades de pointes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Drug name</th>
<th>Drug class</th>
<th>Drug name</th>
<th>Drug class</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>amiodarone (Cordarone) or (Pacerone)</td>
<td>antiarrhythmic</td>
<td>haloperidol (Haldol)</td>
<td>antipsychotic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>amitriptyline</td>
<td>antidepressant</td>
<td>ibutilide (Corvert)</td>
<td>antiarrhythmic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chlorpromazine</td>
<td>antipsychotic/antiemetic</td>
<td>ketoconazole (Nizoral)</td>
<td>antifungal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>clarithromycin (Biaxin)</td>
<td>antibiotic</td>
<td>levofloxacine (Levaquin)</td>
<td>antibiotic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>desipramine (Norpramin)</td>
<td>antidepressant</td>
<td>methadone (Methadose or Dolophine)</td>
<td>opiate agonist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>disopyramide (Norpace)</td>
<td>antiarrhythmic</td>
<td>procainamide</td>
<td>antiarrhythmic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dofetilide (Tikosyn)</td>
<td>antiarrhythmic</td>
<td>quinidine</td>
<td>antiarrhythmic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dolasetron (Anzemet)</td>
<td>antiemetic</td>
<td>sertraline (Zoloft)</td>
<td>antidepressant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>droperidol (Inapsine)</td>
<td>sedative; antinauseant</td>
<td>sotalol (Betapace)</td>
<td>antiarrhythmic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>erythromycin (Erythrocin)</td>
<td>antibiotic; GI stimulant</td>
<td>sumatriptan (Imitrex)</td>
<td>anti-migraine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fluoxetine (Prozac)</td>
<td>antidepressant</td>
<td>thioridazine</td>
<td>antipsychotic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The QT interval increases the risk of a life-threatening arrhythmia known as torsades de pointes. This variation is also associated with certain medications such as Class IA antiarrhythmics. (See Drugs that increase the QT interval.) Prolonged QT syndrome is a congenital conduction-system defect present in certain families. Short QT intervals may result from digoxin toxicity or hypercalcemia.
The U wave

The U wave represents the recovery period of the Purkinje or ventricular conduction fibers. It isn’t present on every rhythm strip. The configuration is the most important characteristic of the U wave.

When present, a normal U wave has the following characteristics (amplitude and duration aren’t measured):
- location—follows the T wave
- configuration—typically upright and rounded
- deflection—upright.

The U wave may not appear on an ECG. A prominent U wave may be due to hypercalcemia, hypokalemia, or digoxin toxicity.

8-step method

Interpreting a rhythm strip is a skill developed through practice. You can use several methods, as long as you’re consistent. Rhythm strip analysis requires a sequential and systematic approach such as that which employs the eight steps outlined here.

Step 1: Determine the rhythm

To determine the heart’s atrial and ventricular rhythms, use either the paper-and-pencil method or the caliper method. (See Methods of measuring rhythm, page 52.)

For atrial rhythm, measure the P-P intervals—the intervals between consecutive P waves. These intervals should occur regularly with only small variations associated with respirations. Then compare the P-P intervals in several cycles. Consistently similar P-P intervals indicate regular atrial rhythm; dissimilar P-P intervals indicate irregular atrial rhythm.

To determine the ventricular rhythm, measure the intervals between two consecutive R waves in the QRS complexes. If an R wave isn’t present, use the Q wave of consecutive QRS complexes. The R-R intervals should occur regularly.
INTERPRETING A RHYTHM STRIP

Methods of measuring rhythm

You can use the paper-and-pencil or caliper method to determine atrial or ventricular rhythm.

**Paper-and-pencil method**

Place the ECG strip on a flat surface. Then position the straight edge of a piece of paper along the strip’s baseline. Move the paper up slightly so the straight edge is near the peak of the R wave. With a pencil, mark the paper at the R waves of two consecutive QRS complexes, as shown above. This is the R-R interval.

Next, move the paper across the strip, aligning the two marks with succeeding R-R intervals. If the distance for each R-R interval is the same, the ventricular rhythm is regular. If the distance varies, the rhythm is irregular.

Use the same method to measure the distance between the P waves (the P-P interval) and determine whether the atrial rhythm is regular or irregular.

**Caliper method**

With the ECG on a flat surface, place one point of the caliper on the peak of the first R wave of two consecutive QRS complexes. Then adjust the caliper legs so the other point is on the peak of the next R wave, as shown above. This distance is the R-R interval.

Now pivot the first point of the caliper toward the third R wave and note whether it falls on the peak of that wave. Check succeeding R-R intervals in the same way. If they’re all the same, the ventricular rhythm is regular. If they vary, the rhythm is irregular.

Use the same method to measure the P-P intervals to determine whether the atrial rhythm is regular or irregular.

Then compare R-R intervals in several cycles. As with atrial rhythms, consistently similar intervals mean a regular rhythm; dissimilar intervals point to an irregular rhythm.

Ask yourself: How irregular is the rhythm? Is it slightly irregular or markedly so? Does the irregularity occur in a pattern (a regularly irregular pattern)? Keep in mind that variations of up to 0.04 second are considered normal.

**Step 2: Determine the rate**

You can use one of three methods to determine atrial and ventricular heart rate. Remember, don’t rely on these methods alone. Always check a pulse to correlate it with the heart rate on the ECG.

**10-times method**

The easiest way to calculate heart rate is the 10-times method, especially if the rhythm is irregular. You’ll notice that ECG paper
is marked in increments of 3 seconds, or 15 large boxes. To figure the atrial rate, obtain a 6-second strip, count the number of P waves, and multiply by 10. Ten 6-second strips represent 1 minute. Calculate ventricular rate the same way, using the R waves.

1,500 method
If the heart rhythm is regular, use the 1,500 method — so named because 1,500 small squares represent 1 minute. Count the small squares between identical points on two consecutive P waves and then divide 1,500 by that number to get the atrial rate. To obtain the ventricular rate, use the same method with two consecutive R waves.

Sequence method
The third method of estimating heart rate is the sequence method, which requires that you memorize a sequence of numbers. (See Calculating heart rate.) To get the atrial rate, find a P wave that peaks on a heavy black line and assign the following numbers to the next six heavy black lines: 300, 150, 100, 75, 60, and 50. Then find the next P wave peak and estimate the atrial rate, based on the number assigned to the nearest heavy black line. Estimate the ventricular rate the same way, using the R wave.
Step 3: Evaluate the P wave

When examining a rhythm strip for P waves, ask yourself: Are P waves present? Do they all have normal configurations? Do they all have a similar size and shape? Is there one P wave for every QRS complex?

Step 4: Determine the duration of the PR interval

To measure the PR interval, count the small squares between the start of the P wave and the start of the QRS complex; then multiply the number of squares by 0.04 second. Now ask yourself: Is the duration a normal 0.12 to 0.20 second? Is the PR interval constant?

Step 5: Determine the duration of the QRS complex

When determining QRS duration, be sure to measure straight across from the end of the PR interval to the end of the S wave, not just to the peak. Remember, the QRS has no horizontal components. To calculate duration, count the number of small squares between the beginning and end of the QRS complex and multiply this number by 0.04 second. Then ask yourself: Is the duration a normal 0.06 to 0.10 second? Are all QRS complexes the same size and shape? (If not, measure each one and describe it individually.) Does a QRS complex appear after every P wave?
Step 6: Evaluate the T waves

Examine the strip for T waves. Then ask yourself: Are T waves present? Do they all have a normal shape? Do they all have a normal amplitude? Do they all have the same amplitude? Do the T waves have the same deflection as the QRS complexes?

Step 7: Determine the duration of the QT interval

Count the number of small squares between the beginning of the QRS complex and the end of the T wave, where the T wave returns to the baseline. Multiply this number by 0.04 second. Ask yourself: Is the duration a normal 0.36 to 0.44 second? (See Correcting the QT interval.)

Step 8: Evaluate any other components

Check for ectopic beats and other abnormalities. Also check the ST segment for abnormalities, and look for the presence of a U wave. Note your findings, and then interpret them by naming the rhythm strip according to one or all of these findings:

- origin of the rhythm (for example, sinus node, atria, AV node, or ventricles)
- rate characteristics (for example, bradycardia or tachycardia)
- rhythm abnormalities (for example, flutter, fibrillation, heart block, escape rhythm, or other arrhythmias).

Correcting the QT interval

The QT interval is affected by the patient’s heart rate. As the heart rate increases, the QT interval decreases; as the heart rate decreases, the QT interval increases. For this reason, evaluating the QT interval based on a standard heart rate of 60 is recommended. This corrected QT interval is known as QTc.

The following formula is used to determine the QTc:

\[
QTc = \sqrt{\frac{QT interval}{R-R interval in seconds}}
\]

The normal QTc for women is less than 0.46 second and for men is less than 0.45 second. When the QTc is longer than 0.50 second in men or women, torsades de pointes is more likely to develop.
Recognizing normal sinus rhythm

Before you can recognize an arrhythmia, you must first be able to recognize normal sinus rhythm. Normal sinus rhythm records an impulse that starts in the sinus node and progresses to the ventricles through a normal conduction pathway—from the sinus node to the atria and AV node, through the bundle of His, to the bundle branches, and on to the Purkinje fibers. Normal sinus rhythm is the standard against which all other rhythms are compared. (See Normal sinus rhythm.)

What makes for normal?

Using the 8-step method previously described, these are the characteristics of normal sinus rhythm:
- Atrial and ventricular rhythms are regular.
- Atrial and ventricular rates fall between 60 and 100 beats/minute, the SA node’s normal firing rate, and all impulses are conducted to the ventricles.

Normal sinus rhythm

Normal sinus rhythm, shown below, represents normal impulse conduction through the heart.

The atrial and ventricular rhythms are regular.
A P wave precedes each QRS complex.
Each component of the ECG complex is present.

Characteristics of normal sinus rhythm:
- Regular rhythm
- Normal rate
- A P wave for every QRS complex; all P waves similar in size and shape
- All QRS complexes similar in size and shape
- Normal PR and QT intervals
- Normal (upright and round) T waves
• P waves are rounded, smooth, and upright in lead II, signaling that a sinus impulse has reached the atria.
• The PR interval is normal (0.12 to 0.20 second), indicating that the impulse is following normal conduction pathways.
• The QRS complex is of normal duration (less than 0.12 second), representing normal ventricular impulse conduction and recovery.
• The T wave is upright in lead II, confirming that normal repolarization has taken place.
• The QT interval is within normal limits (0.36 to 0.44 second).
• No ectopic or aberrant beats occur.

**That’s a wrap!**

**Rhythm strip interpretation review**

**Normal P wave**
- **Location**—before the QRS complex
- **Amplitude**—2 to 3 mm high
- **Duration**—0.06 to 0.12 second
- **Configuration**—usually rounded and upright
- **Deflection**—positive or upright in leads I, II, aV\(_R\), and V\(_2\) to V\(_6\); usually positive but may vary in leads III and aV\(_L\); negative or inverted in lead aV\(_R\); biphasic or variable in lead V\(_1\)

**Normal PR interval**
- **Location**—from the beginning of the P wave to the beginning of the QRS complex
- **Duration**—0.12 to 0.20 second

**Normal QRS complex**
- **Location**—follows the PR interval
- **Amplitude**—5 to 30 mm high but differs for each lead used
- **Duration**—0.06 to 0.10 second, or half the PR interval
- **Configuration**—consists of the Q wave, the R wave, and the S wave
- **Deflection**—positive in leads I, II, III, aV\(_L\), aV\(_R\), and V\(_4\) to V\(_6\) and negative in leads aV\(_R\) and V\(_1\) to V\(_3\)

**Normal ST segment**
- **Location**—from the S wave to the beginning of the T wave
- **Deflection**—usually isoelectric; may vary from –0.5 to +1 mm in some precordial leads

**Normal T wave**
- **Location**—after the S wave
- **Amplitude**—0.5 mm in leads I, II, and III and up to 10 mm in the precordial leads
- **Configuration**—typically round and smooth
- **Deflection**—usually upright in leads I, II, and V\(_3\) to V\(_6\); inverted in lead aV\(_R\); variable in all other leads

**Normal QT interval**
- **Location**—from the beginning of the QRS complex to the end of the T wave
- **Duration**—varies; usually lasts from 0.36 to 0.44 second

*(continued)*
Rhythm strip interpretation review (continued)

Normal U wave
- **Location**—after T wave
- **Configuration**—typically upright and rounded
- **Deflection**—upright

Interpreting a rhythm strip: 8-step method
- Step 1: Determine the rhythm
- Step 2: Determine the rate
- Step 3: Evaluate the P wave
- Step 4: Measure the PR interval
- Step 5: Determine the QRS complex duration
- Step 6: Examine the T waves
- Step 7: Measure the QT interval duration
- Step 8: Check for ectopic beats and other abnormalities

Normal sinus rhythm
Normal sinus rhythm is the standard against which all other rhythms are compared.

**Characteristics**
- Regular rhythm
- Normal rate
- P wave for every QRS complex; all P waves similar in size and shape
- All QRS complexes similar in size and shape
- Normal PR and QT intervals
- Normal T waves

Quick quiz

1. The P wave represents:
   - A. atrial repolarization.
   - B. atrial depolarization.
   - C. ventricular depolarization.
   - D. ventricular repolarization.

   **Answer:** B. The impulse spreading across the atria, or atrial depolarization, generates a P wave.

2. The normal duration of a QRS complex is:
   - A. 0.06 to 0.10 second.
   - B. 0.12 to 0.20 second.
   - C. 0.24 to 0.28 second.
   - D. 0.36 to 0.44 second.

   **Answer:** A. Normal duration of a QRS complex, which represents ventricular depolarization, is 0.06 to 0.10 second.
3. To gather information about impulse conduction from the atria to the ventricles, study the:
   A. P wave.
   B. PR interval.
   C. ST segment.
   D. T wave.
   **Answer:** B. The PR interval measures the interval between atrial depolarization and ventricular depolarization. A normal PR interval is 0.12 to 0.20 second.

4. The period when myocardial cells are vulnerable to extra stimuli begins with the:
   A. end of the P wave.
   B. start of the R wave.
   C. start of the Q wave.
   D. peak of the T wave.
   **Answer:** D. The peak of the T wave represents the beginning of the relative, although not the absolute, refractory period, when the cells are vulnerable to stimuli.

5. Atrial and ventricular rates can be determined by counting the number of small boxes between:
   A. the end of one P wave and the beginning of another.
   B. two consecutive P or R waves.
   C. the middle of two consecutive T waves.
   D. the beginning of the P wave to the end of the T wave.
   **Answer:** B. Atrial and ventricular rates can be determined by counting the number of small boxes between two consecutive P or R waves and then dividing that number into 1,500.

**Test strips**

Now try these test strips. Fill in the blanks below with the particular characteristics of the strip.

**Strip 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Atrial rhythm:</th>
<th>QRS complex:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ventricular rhythm:</td>
<td>T wave:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atrial rate:</td>
<td>QT interval:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ventricular rate:</td>
<td>Other:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P wave:</td>
<td>Interpretation:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PR interval:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Strip 2

Atrial rhythm: ________________  QRS complex: ________________
Ventricular rhythm: ________________  T wave: ________________
Atrial rate: ________________  QT interval: ________________
Ventricular rate: ________________  Other: ________________
P wave: ________________  Interpretation: ________________
PR interval: ________________

Answers to test strips

1. Rhythm: Atrial and ventricular rhythms are regular
   Rate: Atrial and ventricular rates are each 79 beats/minute
   P wave: Normal size and configuration
   PR interval: 0.12 second
   QRS complex: 0.08 second; normal size and configuration
   T wave: Normal configuration
   QT interval: 0.44 second
   Other: None
   Interpretation: Normal sinus rhythm

2. Rhythm: Atrial and ventricular rhythms are regular
   Rate: Atrial and ventricular rates are each 72 beats/minute
   P wave: Normal size and configuration
   PR interval: 0.20 second
   QRS complex: 0.10 second; normal size and configuration
   T wave: Normal configuration
   QT interval: 0.42 second
   Other: None
   Interpretation: Normal sinus rhythm

Scoring

☆☆☆ If you answered all five questions correctly and filled in all the blanks pretty much as we did, hooray! You can read our rhythm strips anytime.
☆☆ If you answered four questions correctly and filled in most of the blanks the way we did, excellent! You deserve a shiny new pair of calipers.
☆ If you answered fewer than four questions correctly and missed most of the blanks, chin up! You're still tops with us.
Part II Recognizing arrhythmias

4 Sinus node arrhythmias  63
5 Atrial arrhythmias  87
6 Junctional arrhythmias  111
7 Ventricular arrhythmias  127
8 Atrioventricular blocks  153
In this chapter, you’ll learn:

♦ the proper way to identify the various sinus node arrhythmias
♦ the role of the sinoatrial node in arrhythmia formation
♦ the causes, significance, treatment, and nursing implications of each arrhythmia
♦ assessment findings associated with each arrhythmia
♦ interpretation of sinus node arrhythmias on an electrocardiogram.

A look at sinus node arrhythmias

When the heart functions normally, the sinoatrial (SA) node, also called the sinus node, acts as the primary pacemaker. The sinus node assumes this role because its automatic firing rate exceeds that of the heart’s other pacemakers. In an adult at rest, the sinus node has an inherent firing rate of 60 to 100 times/minute.

The SA node’s blood supply comes from the right coronary artery or the left circumflex artery. The autonomic nervous system richly innervates the sinus node through the vagus nerve, a parasympathetic nerve, and several sympathetic nerves. Stimulation of the vagus nerve decreases the node’s firing rate, and stimulation of the sympathetic system increases it.
In sinus arrhythmia, the pacemaker cells of the SA node fire irregularly. The cardiac rate stays within normal limits, but the rhythm is irregular and corresponds with the respiratory cycle. Sinus arrhythmia can occur naturally in athletes and children, but it rarely occurs in infants. Conditions unrelated to respiration may also produce sinus arrhythmia, including inferior wall myocardial infarction (MI), advanced age, use of digoxin (Lanoxin) or morphine, and conditions involving increased intracranial pressure.

How it happens

Sinus arrhythmia, the heart’s normal response to respirations, results from an inhibition of reflex vagal activity, or tone. During inspiration, an increase in the flow of blood back to the heart reduces vagal tone, which increases the heart rate. ECG complexes fall closer together, which shortens the P-P interval, the time elapsed between two consecutive P waves.

During expiration, venous return decreases, which in turn increases vagal tone, slows the heart rate, and lengthens the P-P interval. (See Breathing and sinus arrhythmia.)

Breathing and sinus arrhythmia

When sinus arrhythmia is related to respirations, you’ll see an increase in heart rate with inspiration and a decrease with expiration, as shown here.
Sick sinus

Sinus arrhythmia usually isn’t significant and produces no symptoms. A marked variation in P-P intervals in an older adult, however, may indicate sick sinus syndrome, a related, potentially more serious phenomenon.

What to look for

When you look for sinus arrhythmia, you’ll see that the rhythm is irregular and corresponds to the respiratory cycle. (See Identifying sinus arrhythmia.) The difference between the shortest and longest P-P intervals—and the shortest and longest R-R intervals—exceeds 0.12 second.

The atrial and ventricular rates are within normal limits (60 to 100 beats/minute) and vary with respiration—faster with inspiration, slower with expiration. All other parameters are normal, except for the QT interval, which may vary slightly but remains normal.

It’s all in the breath

Look for a peripheral pulse rate that increases during inspiration and decreases during expiration. If the arrhythmia is caused by an underlying condition, you may note signs and symptoms of that condition.

Identifying sinus arrhythmia

This rhythm strip illustrates sinus arrhythmia. Look for these distinguishing characteristics.

- **Rhythm:** Irregular
- **Rate:** 60 beats/minute
- **P wave:** Normal
- **PR interval:** 0.16 second
- **QRS complex:** 0.06 second
- **T wave:** Normal
- **QT interval:** 0.36 second
- **Other:** Phasic slowing and quickening

The cyclic irregular rhythm varies with the respiratory cycle.
Sinus arrhythmia is easier to detect when the heart rate is slow; it may disappear when the heart rate increases, as with exercise or after atropine administration.

How you intervene

Unless the patient is symptomatic, treatment usually isn’t necessary. If sinus arrhythmia is unrelated to respirations, the underlying cause may require treatment.

When caring for a patient with sinus arrhythmia, observe the heart rhythm during respiration to determine whether the arrhythmia coincides with the respiratory cycle. Be sure to check the monitor carefully to avoid an inaccurate interpretation of the waveform. (See A longer look at sinus arrhythmia.)

Keep at it

If sinus arrhythmia is induced by drugs, such as morphine sulfate and other sedatives, the practitioner may decide to continue to give the patient those medications. However, if sinus arrhythmia develops suddenly in a patient taking digoxin, notify the practitioner immediately. The patient may be experiencing digoxin toxicity.

Sinus bradycardia

Sinus bradycardia is characterized by a sinus rate below 60 beats/minute and a regular rhythm. It may occur normally during sleep or in a person with a well-conditioned heart—an athlete, for example. Many athletes develop it because their well-conditioned hearts can maintain a normal stroke volume with less-than-normal effort. Sinus bradycardia also occurs normally during sleep due to decreased metabolic demands.
How it happens

Sinus bradycardia usually occurs as the normal response to a reduced demand for blood flow. In this case, vagal stimulation increases and sympathetic stimulation decreases. (See Causes of sinus bradycardia.) As a result, automaticity (the tendency of cells to initiate their own impulses) in the SA node diminishes.

A tolerable condition?

Sinus bradycardia commonly occurs after an inferior wall MI that involves the right coronary artery, which supplies blood to the SA node. It can also result from numerous other conditions and the use of certain drugs.

The clinical significance of sinus bradycardia depends on how low the rate is and whether the patient is symptomatic. For example, most adults can tolerate a sinus bradycardia of 45 to 59 beats/minute but are less tolerant of a rate below 45 beats/minute.

No symptoms? No problem.

Usually, sinus bradycardia produces no symptoms and is insignificant. Unless the patient shows symptoms of decreased cardiac output, no treatment is necessary. (See the appendix ACLS algorithms.)

Symptoms? Problem!

When sinus bradycardia produces symptoms, however, prompt attention is critical. The heart of a patient with underlying cardiac disease may not be able to compensate for a drop in rate by increasing its stroke volume. The resulting drop in cardiac output produces such signs and symptoms as hypotension and dizziness. Bradycardia may also predispose some patients to more serious arrhythmias, such as ventricular tachycardia and ventricular fibrillation.

Causes of sinus bradycardia

Sinus bradycardia may be caused by:
- noncardiac disorders, such as hyperkalemia, increased intracranial pressure, hypothyroidism, hypothermia, sleep, and glaucoma
- conditions producing excess vagal stimulation or decreased sympathetic stimulation, such as sleep, deep relaxation, Valsalva’s maneuver, carotid sinus massage, and vomiting
- cardiac diseases, such as sinoatrial node disease, cardiomyopathy, myocarditis, and myocardial ischemia, immediately following an inferior wall myocardial infarction
- certain drugs, especially beta-adrenergic blockers, digoxin (Lanoxin), calcium channel blockers, lithium (Lithobid), and antiarrhythmics, such as sotalol (Betapace), amiodarone (Cordarone), propafenone (Rhythmol), and quinidine.
In a patient with acute inferior wall MI, sinus bradycardia is considered a favorable prognostic sign, unless it’s accompanied by hypotension. Because sinus bradycardia rarely affects children, it’s considered a poor prognostic sign in children. (See Bradycardia and tachycardia in children.)

**What to look for**

In sinus bradycardia, the atrial and ventricular rhythms are regular, as are their rates, except that they’re both under 60 beats/minute. (See Identifying sinus bradycardia.) All other characteristics appear normal. You’ll see a P wave preceding each QRS complex and a normal PR interval, QRS complex, T wave, and QT interval.

**When cardiac output gets low**

As long as a patient can compensate for the decreased cardiac output, he’s likely to remain asymptomatic. If compensatory mechanisms fail, however, signs and symptoms of declining cardiac output, such as hypotension and dizziness, usually appear.

Palpitations and pulse irregularities may occur if the patient experiences more ectopic beats, such as premature atrial, junctional, or ventricular contractions. Diminished blood flow to the cerebrum may produce signs of decreased level of consciousness (LOC) such as confusion. Bradycardia-induced syncope (Stokes-Adams attack) may also occur.

**How you intervene**

If the patient is asymptomatic and his vital signs are stable, treatment isn’t necessary. Continue to observe his heart rhythm, monitoring the progression and duration of the bradycardia. Evaluate his tolerance of the rhythm at rest and with activity. Review the drugs he’s taking. Check with the practitioner about stopping any medications that may be depressing the SA node, such as digoxin, beta-adrenergic blockers, or calcium channel blockers. Before giving those drugs, make sure the heart rate is within a safe range.

**Identify and correct**

If the patient is symptomatic, treatment aims to identify and correct the underlying cause. Meanwhile, the heart rate must be maintained with transcutaneous pacing. Use drugs such as atropine, epinephrine, or dopamine, while awaiting a pacemaker or if pacing is ineffective.
SINUS BRADYCARDIA

Atropine is given as a 0.5 mg dose by rapid injection. The dose may be repeated every 3 to 5 minutes up to a maximum of 3 mg total. If atropine proves ineffective, administer an epinephrine infusion at a rate of 2 to 10 mcg/minute. If low blood pressure accompanies bradycardia, administer a dopamine infusion at 2 to 10 mcg/kg/minute. Treatment of chronic, symptom-producing sinus bradycardia requires insertion of a permanent pacemaker.

Check the ABCs

If the patient abruptly develops a significant sinus bradycardia, assess his airway, breathing, and circulation (ABCs). If these are adequate, determine whether the patient has an effective cardiac output. If not, he’ll become symptomatic. (See Clues to symptomatic bradycardia, page 70.)

When administering atropine, be sure to give the correct dose: Doses lower than 0.5 mg can have a paradoxical effect, slowing the heart rate even further. Keep in mind that a patient with a transplanted heart won’t respond to atropine and may require pacing for emergency treatment.

Identifying sinus bradycardia

This rhythm strip illustrates sinus bradycardia. Look for these distinguishing characteristics.

- **Rhythm:** Regular
- **Rate:** 48 beats/minute
- **P wave:** Normal
- **PR interval:** 0.16 second
- **QRS complex:** 0.08 second
- **T wave:** Normal
- **QT interval:** 0.50 second
- **Other:** None

A normal P wave precedes each QRS complex.

The rhythm is regular with a rate below 60 beats/minute.
If sinus bradycardia is the tortoise of the sinus arrhythmias, sinus tachycardia is the hare. Sinus tachycardia in an adult is characterized by a sinus rate of more than 100 beats/minute. The rate rarely exceeds 160 beats/minute except during strenuous exercise; the maximum rate achievable with exercise decreases with age.

How it happens

The clinical significance of sinus tachycardia depends on the underlying cause. (See Causes of sinus tachycardia.) The arrhythmia may be the body’s response to exercise or high emotional states and may be of no clinical significance. It may also occur with hypovolemia, hemorrhage, or pain. When the stimulus for the tachycardia is removed, the arrhythmia spontaneously resolves.

Hard on the heart

Sinus tachycardia can also be a significant arrhythmia with dire consequences. Because myocardial demands for oxygen are increased at higher heart rates, tachycardia can bring on an episode of chest pain in patients with coronary artery disease.

An increase in heart rate can also be detrimental for patients with obstructive types of heart conditions, such as aortic stenosis and hypertrophic cardiomyopathy.

Sinus tachycardia occurs in about 30% of patients after acute MI and is considered a poor prognostic sign because it may be associated with massive heart damage. Persistent tachycardia may also signal impending heart failure or cardiogenic shock.

Causes of sinus tachycardia

Sinus tachycardia may be a normal response to exercise, pain, stress, fever, or strong emotions, such as fear and anxiety. It can also occur:

- in certain cardiac conditions, such as heart failure, cardiogenic shock, and pericarditis
- as a compensatory mechanism in shock, anemia, respiratory distress, pulmonary embolism, sepsis, and hyperthyroidism
- when taking such drugs as atropine, isoproterenol (Isuprel), aminophylline, dopamine, dobutamine, epinephrine, alcohol, caffeine, nicotine, and amphetamines.
What to look for

In sinus tachycardia, atrial and ventricular rhythms are regular. (See Identifying sinus tachycardia.) Both rates are equal, generally 100 to 160 beats/minute. As in sinus bradycardia, the P wave is of normal size and shape and precedes each QRS, but it may increase in amplitude. As the heart rate increases, the P wave may be superimposed on the preceding T wave and difficult to identify.

The PR interval, QRS complex, and T wave are normal. The QT interval normally shortens with tachycardia.

Pulse check!

When assessing a patient with sinus tachycardia, look for a pulse rate of more than 100 beats/minute but with a regular rhythm. Usually, the patient is asymptomatic. However, if his cardiac output falls and compensatory mechanisms fail, he may experience hypotension, syncope, and blurred vision. (See What happens in tachycardia, page 72.)

He may report chest pain and palpitations, commonly described as a pounding chest or a sensation of skipped heartbeats. He may also report a sense of nervousness or anxiety. If heart failure develops, he may exhibit crackles, an extra heart sound (S₃), and jugular vein distention.

Identifying sinus tachycardia

This rhythm strip illustrates sinus tachycardia. Look for these distinguishing characteristics.

- **Rhythm:** Regular
- **Rate:** 120 beats/minute
- **P wave:** Normal
- **PR interval:** 0.14 second
- **QRS complex:** 0.06 second
- **T wave:** Normal
- **QT interval:** 0.34 second
- **Other:** None
What happens in tachycardia

Tachycardia can lower cardiac output by reducing ventricular filling time and the amount of blood pumped by the ventricles during each contraction. Normally, ventricular volume reaches 120 to 130 ml during diastole. In tachycardia, decreased ventricular volume leads to hypotension and decreased peripheral perfusion.

As cardiac output plummets, arterial pressure and peripheral perfusion decrease. Tachycardia worsens myocardial ischemia by increasing the heart’s demand for oxygen and reducing the duration of diastole—the period of greatest coronary flow.

How you intervene

When treating the asymptomatic patient, focus on determining the cause of the sinus tachycardia. Treatment for a symptomatic patient involves maintaining adequate cardiac output and tissue perfusion and identifying and correcting the underlying cause. For example, if the tachycardia is caused by hemorrhage, treatment includes stopping the bleeding and replacing blood and fluid.

Slow it down

If tachycardia leads to cardiac ischemia, treatment may include medications to slow the heart rate. The most commonly used drugs include beta-adrenergic blockers, such as metoprolol (Lopressor) and atenolol (Tenormin), and calcium channel blockers such as verapamil (Calan).

Getting at the history

Check the patient’s medication history. Over-the-counter sympathomimetic agents, which mimic the effects of the sympathetic nervous system, may contribute to the sinus tachycardia. These agents may be contained in nose drops and cold formulas.

You should also ask about the patient’s use of caffeine, nicotine, alcohol, and such recreational drugs as cocaine and amphetamines, any of which can trigger tachycardia. Advise him to avoid these substances if he has used them.

More steps to take

Here are other steps you should take for the patient with sinus tachycardia:

- Because sinus tachycardia can lead to injury of the heart muscle, check for chest pain or angina. Also assess for signs and symptoms of heart failure, including crackles, an S3 heart sound, and jugular vein distention.
- Monitor intake and output as well as daily weight.
• Check the patient’s LOC to assess cerebral perfusion.
• Provide the patient with a calm environment. Help to reduce fear and anxiety, which can fuel the arrhythmia.
• Teach about procedures and treatments. Include relaxation techniques in the information you provide.
• Be aware that a sudden onset of sinus tachycardia after an MI may signal extension of the infarction. Prompt recognition is vital so treatment can be started.
• Remember that tachycardia is commonly the first sign of a pulmonary embolism. Maintain suspicion, especially if your patient has risk factors for thrombotic emboli.

Sinus arrest

A disorder of impulse formation, sinus arrest is caused by a lack of electrical activity in the atrium, a condition called atrial standstill. (See Causes of sinus arrest.) During atrial standstill, the atria aren’t stimulated and an entire PQRST complex will be missing from the ECG strip.

Except for this missing complex, or pause, the ECG usually remains normal. Atrial standstill is called sinus pause when one or two beats aren’t formed and sinus arrest when three or more beats aren’t formed.

Sinus arrest closely resembles third-degree SA block, also called exit block, on the ECG strip. (See Understanding sinoatrial blocks, pages 74 and 75.)

How it happens

Sinus arrest occurs when the SA node fails to generate an impulse. Such failure may result from a number of conditions, including acute infection, heart disease, and vagal stimulation. Sinus arrest may be associated with sick sinus syndrome.

The clinical significance of sinus arrest depends on the patient’s symptoms. If the pauses are short and infrequent, the patient will most likely be asymptomatic and won’t require treatment. He may have a normal sinus rhythm for days or weeks between episodes of sinus arrest. He may not be able to feel the arrhythmias at all.

Pauses of 2 to 3 seconds normally occur in healthy adults during sleep and occasionally in patients with increased vagal tone or hypersensitive carotid sinus disease.

Causes of sinus arrest

The following conditions can cause sinus arrest:
• sinus node disease, such as fibrosis and idio-pathic degeneration
• increased vagal tone, as occurs with Valsalva’s maneuver, carotid sinus massage, and vomiting
• digoxin (Lanoxin), quinidine, procainamide and salicylates, especially if given at toxic levels
• excessive doses of beta-adrenergic blockers, such as metoprolol (Lopressor) and propranolol (Inderal)
• cardiac disorders, such as chronic coronary artery disease, acute myocarditis, cardiomyopathy, and hypertensive heart disease
• acute inferior wall myocardial infarction
• sick sinus syndrome
• acute infection.
Understanding sinoatrial blocks

In sinoatrial (SA) block, the SA node discharges impulses at regular intervals. Some of those impulses, though, are delayed on their way to the atria. Based on the length of the delay, SA blocks are divided into three categories: first-, second-, and third-degree. Second-degree block is further divided into type I and type II.

First-degree SA block consists of a delay between the firing of the sinus node and depolarization of the atria. Because the ECG doesn’t show sinus node activity, you can’t detect first-degree SA block. However, you can detect the other three types of SA block.

Second-degree type I block
In second-degree type I block, conduction time between the sinus node and the surrounding atrial tissue becomes progressively longer until an entire cycle is dropped. The pause is less than twice the shortest P-P interval.

Second-degree type II block
In second-degree type II block, conduction time between the sinus node and atrial tissue is normal until an impulse is blocked. The duration of the pause is a multiple of the P-P interval.
If sinus arrest is frequent and prolonged, however, the patient will most likely have symptoms. The arrhythmias can produce syncope or near-syncopal episodes usually within 7 seconds of asystole. During a prolonged pause, the patient may fall and injure himself. Other situations may be just as serious. For example, a symptom-producing arrhythmia that occurs while the patient is driving a car could result in a fatal accident.

What to look for

When assessing for sinus pause, you’ll find that atrial and ventricular rhythms are regular except for a missing complex at the onset of atrial standstill. (See Identifying sinus arrest, page 76.) The atrial and ventricular rates are equal and usually within normal limits. The rate may vary, however, as a result of the pauses.
Of normal size and shape, a P wave precedes each QRS complex but is absent during a pause. The PR interval is normal and constant when the P wave is present and not measurable when absent. The QRS complex, the T wave, and the QT interval are normal when present and are absent during a pause.

You might see junctional escape beats and premature atrial, junctional, or ventricular contractions. With sinus arrest, the length of the pause isn’t a multiple of the previous R-R intervals.

**Signs of recurrent pauses**

You can’t detect a pulse or heart sounds when sinus arrest occurs. Usually, the patient is asymptomatic. Recurrent pauses may cause signs of decreased cardiac output, such as low blood pressure, altered mental status, and cool, clammy skin. The patient may also complain of dizziness or blurred vision.

**How you intervene**

An asymptomatic patient needs no treatment. For a patient displaying mild symptoms, treatment focuses on maintaining cardiac output and identifying the cause of the sinus arrest. That
SINUS ARREST

May involve stopping medications that contribute to SA node suppression, such as digoxin, beta-adrenergic blockers, and calcium channel blockers.

Emergent treatment

A patient who develops signs of circulatory collapse needs immediate treatment. As with sinus bradycardia, emergency treatment includes using a temporary pacemaker and administration of atropine or epinephrine. A permanent pacemaker may be implanted for long-term management.

The goal for the patient with sinus arrest is to maintain adequate cardiac output and perfusion. Be sure to record and document the frequency and duration of pauses. Determine whether a pause is the result of sinus arrest or SA block.

Don’t let sleeping pauses lie

Examine the circumstances under which sinus pauses occur. A sinus pause may be insignificant if detected while the patient is sleeping. If the pauses are recurrent, assess the patient for evidence of decreased cardiac output, such as altered mental status, low blood pressure, and cool, clammy skin.

Ask him whether he’s dizzy or light-headed or has blurred vision. Does he feel as if he has passed out? If so, he may be experiencing syncope from a prolonged sinus arrest. (See Syncope and sinus arrest.)

Document the patient’s vital signs and how he feels during pauses as well as what activities he was involved in when they occurred. Activities that increase vagal stimulation, such as Valsalva’s maneuver or vomiting, increase the likelihood of sinus pauses.

Syncope and sinus arrest

A patient with sinus arrest is at risk for syncope. Ask your patient whether he has ever passed out or felt as if he were going to pass out.

Also ask about a history of falls. If he has passed out or if he has a history of falls, obtain a detailed description of each episode, including where and how the syncope occurred.

Asking questions

If possible, check with friends and family members who witnessed the episodes to find out what happened and how long the patient remained unconscious each time.

The information you gather may help determine whether a vagal mechanism was involved. The presence of syncope or sinus pauses on an electrocardiogram may indicate the need for further electrophysiologic evaluation.

If the patient is dizzy or light-headed, he may be experiencing syncope.
When matters get even worse

Assess for a progression of the arrhythmia. Notify the practitioner immediately if the patient becomes unstable. Lower the head of the bed and administer atropine or epinephrine, as ordered or as your facility’s policy directs. Withhold medications that may contribute to sinus pauses and check with the practitioner about whether those drugs should be continued.

If appropriate, be alert for signs of digoxin, quinidine, or procaainamide toxicity. Obtain a serum digoxin level and a serum electrolyte level. If a pacemaker is implanted, give the patient discharge instructions about pacemaker care.

Sick sinus syndrome

Also called sinus nodal dysfunction, sick sinus syndrome refers to a wide spectrum of SA node abnormalities. The syndrome is caused by disturbances in the way impulses are generated or the inability to conduct impulses to the atrium.

Sick sinus syndrome usually shows up as bradycardia, with episodes of sinus arrest and SA block interspersed with sudden, brief periods of rapid atrial fibrillation. Patients are also prone to paroxysms of other atrial tachyarrhythmias, such as atrial flutter and ectopic atrial tachycardia, a condition sometimes referred to as bradycardia-tachycardia (or brady-tachy) syndrome.

Most patients with sick sinus syndrome are older than age 60, but anyone can develop the arrhythmia. It’s rare in children except after open-heart surgery that results in SA node damage. The arrhythmia affects men and women equally. The onset is progressive, insidious, and chronic.

How it happens

Sick sinus syndrome results from a dysfunction of the sinus node’s automaticity or abnormal conduction or blockages of impulses coming out of the nodal region. (See Causes of sick sinus syndrome.) These conditions, in turn, stem from a degeneration of the area’s autonomic nervous system and partial destruction of the sinus node, as may occur with an interrupted blood supply after an inferior wall MI.

Blocked exits

In addition, certain conditions can affect the atrial wall surrounding the SA node and cause exit blocks. Conditions that cause inflammation or degeneration of atrial tissue can also lead to sick...
SICK SINUS SYNDROME

sinus syndrome. In many patients, though, the exact cause of this syndrome is never identified.

**Prognosis of the diagnosis**

The significance of sick sinus syndrome depends on the patient’s age, the presence of other diseases, and the type and duration of the specific arrhythmias that occur. If atrial fibrillation is involved, the prognosis is worse, most likely because of the risk of thromboembolic complications.

If prolonged pauses are involved with sick sinus syndrome, syncope may occur. The length of a pause significant enough to cause syncope varies with the patient’s age, posture at the time, and cerebrovascular status. Consider significant any pause that lasts at least 2 to 3 seconds.

**Long-term problems**

A significant part of the diagnosis is whether the patient experiences symptoms while the disturbance occurs. Because the syndrome is progressive and chronic, a symptomatic patient needs lifelong treatment. In addition, thromboembolism may develop as a complication of sick sinus syndrome, possibly resulting in stroke or peripheral embolization.

**What to look for**

Sick sinus syndrome encompasses several potential rhythm disturbances that may be intermittent or chronic. (See Identifying sick sinus syndrome, page 80.) Those rhythm disturbances include one or a combination of:

- sinus bradycardia
- SA block
- sinus arrest
- sinus bradycardia alternating with sinus tachycardia
- episodes of atrial tachyarrhythmias, such as atrial fibrillation and atrial flutter
- failure of the sinus node to increase heart rate with exercise.

**Check for speed bumps**

Also look for an irregular rhythm with sinus pauses and abrupt rate changes. Atrial and ventricular rates may be fast, slow, or alternating periods of fast rates and slow rates interrupted by pauses.

The P wave varies with the rhythm and usually precedes each QRS complex. The PR interval is usually within normal limits but varies with changes in the rhythm. The QRS complex and T wave are usually normal, as is the QT interval, which may vary with rhythm changes.
Identifying sick sinus syndrome

This rhythm strip illustrates sick sinus syndrome. Look for these distinguishing characteristics.

- **Rhythm:** Irregular
- **Rate:** Atrial—60 beats/minute; ventricular—70 beats/minute
- **P wave:** Configuration varies
- **PR interval:** Varies with rhythm
- **QRS complex:** 0.10 second
- **T wave:** Configuration varies
- **QT interval:** Varies with rhythm changes
- **Other:** None

No set pattern

The patient’s pulse rate may be fast, slow, or normal, and the rhythm may be regular or irregular. You can usually detect an irregularity on the monitor or when palpating the pulse, which may feel inappropriately slow, then rapid.

If you monitor the patient’s heart rate during exercise or exertion, you may observe an inappropriate response to exercise such as a failure of the heart rate to increase. You may also detect episodes of brady-tachy syndrome, atrial flutter, atrial fibrillation, SA block, or sinus arrest on the monitor.

Extra sounds

Other assessment findings depend on the patient’s condition. For example, he may have crackles in the lungs, an S₃ heart sound, or a dilated and displaced left ventricular apical impulse if he has underlying cardiomyopathy.

The patient may show signs and symptoms of decreased cardiac output, such as hypotension, blurred vision, and syncope, a common experience with this arrhythmia. (See *Check mental status.*
How you intervene

As with other sinus node arrhythmias, no treatment is necessary if the patient is asymptomatic. If the patient is symptomatic, however, treatment aims to alleviate signs and symptoms and correct the underlying cause of the arrhythmia.

Atropine or epinephrine may be given initially for symptomatic bradycardia. A temporary or permanent pacemaker may be used. Tachyarrhythmias may be treated with antiarrhythmic medications, such as metoprolol and digoxin.

Drugs don’t always help

Unfortunately, medications used to suppress tachyarrhythmias may worsen underlying SA node disease and bradyarrhythmias. The patient may need anticoagulants if he develops sudden bursts, or paroxysms, of atrial fibrillation. The anticoagulants help prevent thromboembolism and stroke, a complication of the condition. (See Recognizing an embolism.)

Watch and document

When caring for a patient with sick sinus syndrome, monitor and document all arrhythmias he experiences and signs or symptoms he develops. Assess how his rhythm responds to activity and pain and look for changes in the rhythm.

Watch the patient carefully after starting calcium channel blockers, beta-adrenergic blockers, or other antiarrhythmic medications. If treatment includes anticoagulant therapy and the insertion of a pacemaker, make sure the patient and his family receive appropriate instruction.

Recognizing an embolism

When caring for a patient with sick sinus syndrome, be alert for signs and symptoms of an embolism, especially if the patient has atrial fibrillation. Any clots that form in the heart can break off and travel through the bloodstream, blocking the blood supply to the lungs, heart, brain, kidneys, intestines, or other organs.

Assess early
Assess the patient for neurologic changes, such as confusion, vision disturbances, weakness, chest pain, dyspnea, tachypnea, tachycardia, and acute onset of pain. Early recognition allows for prompt treatment.
**SA node**
- Acts as primary pacemaker
- Inherent firing rate of 60 to 100 times/minute in a resting adult
- Supplied by blood from the right coronary artery and left circumflex artery

**Sinus arrhythmia**

**Characteristics**
- **Rhythms:** Irregular, corresponding to the respiratory cycle
- **Rates:** Within normal limits; vary with respiration
- **Other parameters:** QT interval variations

**Treatment**
- No treatment if asymptomatic
- Correction of the underlying cause

**Sinus bradycardia**

**Characteristics**
- **Rhythms:** Regular
- **Rates:** Less than 60 beats/minute
- **Other parameters:** Normal

**Treatment**
- No treatment if asymptomatic
- Correction of the underlying cause
- Temporary pacing to increase heart rate
- Atropine or epinephrine to maintain heart rate
- Dopamine for hypotension
- Permanent pacing if necessary

**Sinus tachycardia**

**Characteristics**
- **Rhythms:** Regular
- **Rates:** Both equal, generally 100 to 160 beats/minute
- **PR interval:** Normal
- **QRS complex:** Normal
- **T wave:** Normal
- **QT interval:** Shortened

**Treatment**
- No treatment if asymptomatic
- Correction of the underlying cause
- Beta-adrenergic blockers or calcium channel blockers if symptomatic

**Sinus arrest**

**Characteristics**
- **Rhythms:** Regular, except for missing PQRST complex
- **Rates:** Equal and usually within normal limits; may vary as a result of pauses
- **P wave:** Normal and constant when P wave is present; not measurable when P wave is absent
- **QRS complex:** Normal when present; absent during pause
- **T wave:** Normal when present; absent during pause
- **QT interval:** Normal when present; absent during pause

**Treatment**
- No treatment if asymptomatic
- Correction of the underlying cause
- Atropine or epinephrine to maintain heart rate
- Temporary pacemaker to maintain adequate cardiac output and perfusion
- Permanent pacemaker if necessary

**Sick sinus syndrome**

**Characteristics**
- **Rhythms:** Irregular with sinus pauses and abrupt rate changes
- **Rates:** Fast, slow, or combination of both

(continued)
Sinus node arrhythmias review (continued)

- **P wave**: Variations with rhythm and usually before QRS complex
- **QRS complex**: Normal
- **T wave**: Normal
- **QT interval**: Normal; variations with rhythm changes

**Treatment**
- No treatment if asymptomatic
- Correction of the underlying cause
- Atropine or epinephrine for symptomatic bradycardia
- Temporary or permanent pacemaker if necessary
- Antiarrhythmics, such as metoprolol and digoxin, for tachyarrhythmias
- Anticoagulants if atrial fibrillation develops

Quick quiz

1. A patient with symptomatic sinus bradycardia at a rate of 40 beats/minute typically experiences:
   - A. high blood pressure.
   - B. hypotension and dyspnea.
   - C. facial flushing and ataxia.
   - D. calf pain and a dry cough.

   **Answer**: B. A patient with symptomatic bradycardia suffers from low cardiac output, which may produce hypotension and dyspnea. The patient may also have chest pain, crackles, an S3 heart sound, and a sudden onset of confusion.

2. For a patient with symptomatic sinus bradycardia, appropriate nursing interventions include establishing I.V. access to administer:
   - A. atropine.
   - B. anticoagulants.
   - C. calcium channel blocker.
   - D. beta-adrenergic blocker.

   **Answer**: A. Atropine or epinephrine are standard treatments for sinus bradycardia.

3. A monitor shows an irregular rhythm and a rate that increases and decreases in consistent cycles. This rhythm most likely represents:
   - A. sinus arrest.
   - B. sinus bradycardia.
   - C. normal sinus rhythm.
   - D. sinus arrhythmia.
**SINUS NODE ARRHYTHMIAS**

*Answer:* D. In sinus arrhythmia, occurring naturally in athletes and young children, the heart rate varies with the respiratory cycle and is rarely treated.

4. Treatment for symptomatic sick sinus syndrome includes:
   A. beta-adrenergic blockers.
   B. ventilatory support.
   C. pacemaker insertion.
   D. cardioversion.

*Answer:* C. A temporary or permanent pacemaker is commonly used to maintain a steady heart rate in patients with sick sinus syndrome.

5. Persistent tachycardia in a patient who has had an MI may signal:
   A. chronic sick sinus syndrome.
   B. pulmonary embolism or stroke.
   C. the healing process.
   D. impending heart failure or cardiogenic shock.

*Answer:* D. Sinus tachycardia occurs in about 30% of patients after acute MI and is considered a poor prognostic sign because it may be associated with massive heart damage.

6. Beta-adrenergic blockers, such as metoprolol and atenolol, and calcium channel blockers such as diltiazem may be used to treat the sinus node arrhythmia:
   A. sinus bradycardia.
   B. sinus tachycardia.
   C. sinus arrest.
   D. sinus arrhythmia.

*Answer:* B. Beta-adrenergic blockers and calcium channel blockers may be used to treat sinus tachycardia.

**Test strips**

Try these test strips. Interpret each strip using the 8-step method and fill in the blanks below with the particular characteristics of the strip. Then compare your answers with the answers given.

**Strip 1**

Atrial rhythm: ____________________________
Ventricular rhythm: ____________________________
QUICK QUIZ

Atrial rate:  
Ventricular rate:  
P wave:  
PR interval:  
QRS complex:  
T wave:  
QT interval:  
Other:  
Interpretation:  

Strip 2

Atrial rhythm:  
Ventricular rhythm:  
Atrial rate:  
Ventricular rate:  
P wave:  
PR interval:  
QRS complex:  
T wave:  
QT interval:  
Other:  
Interpretation:  

Strip 3

Atrial rhythm:  
Ventricular rhythm:  
Atrial rate:  
Ventricular rate:  
P wave:  
PR interval:  
QRS complex:  
T wave:  
QT interval:  

Other: ____________________________
Interpretation: ____________________________

**Answers to test strips**

1. **Rhythm:** Regular except during pause  
   **Rate:** Atrial and ventricular—50 beats/minute  
   **P wave:** Normal size and configuration, except when missing during pause  
   **PR interval:** 0.16 second  
   **QRS complex:** 0.10 second; normal size and configuration except when missing during pause  
   **T wave:** Normal except when missing during pause  
   **QT interval:** 0.42 second  
   **Other:** Pause isn’t a multiple of a previous sinus rhythm  
   **Interpretation:** Sinus arrest

2. **Rhythm:** Regular  
   **Rate:** Atrial and ventricular—110 beats/minute  
   **P wave:** Normal configuration  
   **PR interval:** 0.14 second  
   **QRS complex:** 0.08 second; normal size and configuration  
   **T wave:** Normal configuration  
   **QT interval:** 0.36 second  
   **Other:** None  
   **Interpretation:** Sinus tachycardia

3. **Rhythm:** Atrial and ventricular—irregular  
   **Rate:** Atrial and ventricular—90 beats/minute  
   **P wave:** Normal  
   **PR interval:** 0.12 second  
   **QRS complex:** 0.10 second and normal  
   **T wave:** Normal  
   **QT interval:** 0.30 second  
   **Other:** None  
   **Interpretation:** Sinus arrhythmia

**Scoring**

⭐⭐⭐ If you answered all six questions correctly and filled in all the blanks close to what we did, wow! You deserve to head down to the nearest club and tachy-brady all night long!

⭐⭐ If you answered five questions correctly and filled in most of the blanks pretty much as we did, super! When you get to the club, you can lead the dance parade.

⭐ If you answered fewer than five questions correctly and missed most of the blanks, don’t worry! A few lessons and you’ll be tachy-bradying with the best of ‘em.
In this chapter, you’ll learn:

- the proper way to identify the various atrial arrhythmias
- the causes, significance, treatment, and nursing implications of each arrhythmia
- assessment findings associated with each arrhythmia
- interpretation of atrial arrhythmias on an ECG.

A look at atrial arrhythmias

Atrial arrhythmias, the most common cardiac rhythm disturbances, result from impulses originating in areas outside the sinoatrial (SA) node. These arrhythmias can affect ventricular filling time and diminish the strength of the atrial kick, a contraction that normally provides the ventricles with about 15% to 25% of their blood.

Triple play

Atrial arrhythmias are thought to result from three mechanisms—enhanced automaticity, circus reentry, and afterdepolarization. Let’s take a look at each cause and review specific atrial arrhythmias:

- Enhanced automaticity—An increase in the automaticity (the ability of cardiac cells to initiate impulses on their own) of the atrial fibers can trigger abnormal impulses. Causes of increased automaticity include extracellular factors, such as hypoxia, acidosis, hyperkalemia, and digoxin toxicity, and conditions in which the function of the heart’s normal pacemaker, the SA node, is diminished. For example, increased vagal tone or hypokalemia can increase the refractory period of the SA node and allow atrial fibers to fire impulses.
ATRIAL ARRHYTHMIAS

- **Reentry**—In reentry, an impulse is delayed along a slow conduction pathway. Despite the delay, the impulse remains active enough to produce another impulse during myocardial repolarization. Reentry may occur with coronary artery disease, cardiomyopathy, or myocardial infarction (MI).

- **Triggered activity**—An injured cell sometimes only partly repolarizes. Partial repolarization can lead to a repetitive ectopic firing called *triggered activity*. The depolarization produced by triggered activity is known as *afterdepolarization* and can lead to atrial or ventricular tachycardia. Afterdepolarization can occur with cell injury, digoxin toxicity, and other conditions. Now let’s examine each atrial arrhythmia in detail.

## Premature atrial contractions

Premature atrial contractions (PACs) originate outside the SA node and usually result from an irritable spot, or focus, in the atria that takes over as pacemaker for one or more beats. The SA node fires an impulse, but then an irritable focus jumps in, firing its own impulse before the SA node can fire again.

PACs may be conducted through the atrioventricular (AV) node and the rest of the heart, depending on their prematurity and the status of the AV and intraventricular conduction system. Nonconducted or blocked PACs don’t trigger a QRS complex.

### How it happens

PACs, which commonly occur in a normal heart, can be triggered by alcohol, nicotine, anxiety, fatigue, fever, and infectious diseases. A patient who eliminates or controls those factors can correct the arrhythmias.

PACs may also be associated with coronary or valvular heart disease, acute respiratory failure, hypoxia, pulmonary disease, digoxin toxicity, and certain electrolyte imbalances.

PACs are rarely dangerous in a patient who doesn’t have heart disease. In fact, they commonly cause no symptoms and can go unrecognized for years. The patient may perceive PACs as normal palpitations or skipped beats.
Early warning sign

However, in patients with heart disease, PACs may lead to more serious arrhythmias, such as atrial fibrillation and atrial flutter. In a patient with an acute MI, PACs can serve as an early sign of heart failure or an electrolyte imbalance. PACs can also result from the release of the neurohormone catecholamine during episodes of pain or anxiety.

What to look for

The hallmark ECG characteristic of a PAC is a premature P wave with an abnormal configuration when compared with a sinus P wave. (See Nonconducted PACs and second-degree AV block.)

When the PAC is conducted, the QRS complex appears similar to the underlying QRS complex. PACs are commonly followed by a pause.

The PAC depolarizes the SA node early, causing it to reset itself and disrupt the normal cycle. The next sinus beat occurs sooner than it normally would, causing the P-P interval between two normal beats that have been interrupted by a PAC to be shorter than three consecutive sinus beats, an occurrence referred to as non-compensatory. (See Identifying premature atrial contractions, page 90.)

Lost in the T

When examining a PAC on an ECG, look for irregular atrial and ventricular rates. The underlying rhythm is usually regular. An irregular rhythm results from the PAC and its corresponding pause. The P wave is premature and abnormally shaped and may be lost in the previous T wave, distorting that wave’s configuration. (The T wave might be bigger or have an extra bump.) Varying configurations of the P wave indicate more than one ectopic site.

The PR interval can be normal, shortened, or slightly prolonged, depending on the origin of the ectopic focus. If no QRS complex follows the premature P wave, a nonconducted PAC has occurred.

PACs may occur in bigeminy (every other beat is a PAC), trigeminy (every third beat is a PAC), or couplets (two PACs in a row).

The patient may have an irregular peripheral or apical pulse rhythm when the PACs occur. He may complain of palpitations, skipped beats, or a fluttering sensation. In a patient with heart
ATRIAL ARRHYTHMIAS

Identifying premature atrial contractions

This rhythm strip illustrates premature atrial contraction (PAC). Look for these distinguishing characteristics.

- **Rhythm:** Irregular
- **Rate:** 90 beats/minute
- **P wave:** Abnormal with PAC; some lost in previous T wave
- **PR interval:** 0.20 second
- **QRS complex:** 0.08 second
- **T wave:** Abnormal with some embedded P waves
- **QT interval:** 0.32 second
- **Other:** Noncompensatory pause (first PAC)

The rhythm is irregular when a PAC occurs.

Premature and abnormally shaped P waves occur.

The baseline rhythm is regular.

PACs may be caused by too much caffeine or alcohol.

Disease, signs and symptoms of decreased cardiac output—such as hypotension and syncope—may occur.

How you intervene

Most patients who are asymptomatic don’t need treatment. In symptomatic patients, however, treatment may focus on eliminating the cause, such as caffeine, alcohol, and nicotine.

When caring for a patient with PACs, assess him to help determine what’s triggering the ectopic beats. Tailor your patient teaching to help the patient correct or avoid the underlying cause. For example, if applicable, the patient should eliminate caffeine or nicotine or learn stress reduction techniques to lessen his anxiety.

If the patient has ischemic or valvular heart disease, monitor him for signs and symptoms of heart failure, electrolyte imbalances, and the development of more severe atrial arrhythmias.
Atrial tachycardia

Atrial tachycardia is a supraventricular tachycardia, which means the impulses driving the rapid rhythm originate above the ventricles. Atrial tachycardia has an atrial rate from 150 to 250 beats/minute. The rapid rate shortens diastole, resulting in a loss of atrial kick, reduced cardiac output, reduced coronary perfusion, and ischemic myocardial changes.

Three types of atrial tachycardia exist: atrial tachycardia with block, multifocal atrial tachycardia, and paroxysmal atrial tachycardia (PAT).

How it happens

Atrial tachycardia can occur in patients with normal hearts. In those cases, the condition is commonly related to excessive use of caffeine or other stimulants, marijuana use, electrolyte imbalances, hypoxia, and physical or psychological stress. However, this arrhythmia is usually associated with primary or secondary cardiac problems.

Cardiac conditions that can cause atrial tachycardia include MI, cardiomyopathy, congenital anomalies, Wolff-Parkinson-White syndrome, and valvular heart disease. This rhythm may also be a component of sick sinus syndrome. Other problems resulting in atrial tachycardia include cor pulmonale, hyperthyroidism, systemic hypertension, and digoxin toxicity, which is the most common cause of atrial tachycardia. (See Signs of digoxin toxicity.)

An ominous sign?

In a healthy person, atrial tachycardia is usually benign. However, this rhythm may be a forerunner of a more serious ventricular arrhythmia, especially if it occurs in a patient with an underlying heart condition.

The increased ventricular rate of atrial tachycardia results in a decrease in the time allowed for the ventricles to fill, an increase in myocardial oxygen consumption, and a decrease in oxygen supply. Angina, heart failure, ischemic myocardial changes, and even MI can occur as a result.

What to look for

Atrial tachycardia is characterized by three or more successive ectopic atrial beats at a rate of 150 to 250 beats/minute. The P wave is usually upright, if visible, and followed by a QRS complex.

Signs of digoxin toxicity

With digoxin toxicity, atrial tachycardia isn’t the only change you might see in your patient. Be alert for the following signs and symptoms, especially if the patient is taking digoxin and his potassium level is low or he’s also taking amiodarone (Cordarone) (because both combinations can increase the risk of digoxin toxicity):

- CNS: fatigue, general muscle weakness, agitation, hallucinations
- EENT: yellow-green halos around visual images, blurred vision
- GI: anorexia, nausea, vomiting
- CV: arrhythmias (most commonly, conduction disturbances with or without atrioventricular block, premature ventricular contractions, and supraventricular arrhythmias), increased severity of heart failure, hypotension (Digoxin’s toxic effects on the heart may be life-threatening and always require immediate attention.)
ATRIAL ARRHYTHMIAS

Keep in mind that atrial beats may be conducted on a 1:1 basis into the ventricles (meaning that each P wave has a QRS complex), so atrial and ventricular rates will be equal. In other cases, atrial beats may be conducted only periodically, meaning the AV conduction system is blocked. The block keeps the ventricles from receiving every impulse.

Think of the AV node as a gatekeeper or doorman. Sometimes it lets atrial impulses through to the ventricles regularly (every other impulse, for instance), and sometimes it lets them in irregularly (two impulses might get through, for instance, and then three, and then one).

**Fast but regular**

When assessing a rhythm strip for atrial tachycardia, you’ll see that atrial rhythm is always regular, and ventricular rhythm is regular when the block is constant and irregular when it isn’t. (See Identifying atrial tachycardia.) The rate consists of three or more successive ectopic atrial beats at a rate of 150 to 250 beats/minute. The ventricular rate varies according to the AV conduction ratio.

The P wave has a 1:1 ratio with the QRS complex unless a block is present. The P wave may not be discernible because of the rapid rate and may be hidden in the previous ST segment or T wave. You may not be able to measure the PR interval if the P wave can’t be distinguished from the preceding T wave.

**Identifying atrial tachycardia**

This rhythm strip illustrates atrial tachycardia. Look for these distinguishing characteristics.

- **Rhythm:** Regular
- **Rate:** 210 beats/minute
- **P wave:** Almost hidden in T wave
- **PR interval:** 0.12 second
- **QRS complex:** 0.10 second
- **T wave:** Distorted by P wave
- **QT interval:** 0.20 second
- **Other:** None
The QRS complex is usually normal, unless the impulses are being conducted abnormally through the ventricles. (See Identifying types of atrial tachycardia.) The T wave may be normal or inverted if ischemia is present. The QT interval is usually within normal limits but may be shorter because of the rapid rate. ST-segment and T-wave changes may appear if ischemia occurs with a prolonged arrhythmia.

Check out the outward signs

The patient with atrial tachycardia has a rapid apical or peripheral pulse rate. The rhythm may be regular or irregular, depending on the type of atrial tachycardia. A patient with PAT may complain that his heart suddenly starts to beat faster or that he suddenly...

Identifying types of atrial tachycardia

Atrial tachycardia comes in three varieties. Here’s a quick rundown of each.

**Atrial tachycardia with block**

Atrial tachycardia with block is caused by increased automaticity of the atrial tissue. As the atrial rate speeds up and atrioventricular (AV) conduction becomes impaired, a 2:1 block typically occurs. Occasionally a type I (Wenckebach) second-degree AV block may be seen. Look for these distinguishing characteristics.

- **Rhythm:** Atrial—regular; ventricular—regular if block is constant, irregular if block is variable
- **Rate:** Atrial—150 to 250 beats/minute, multiple of ventricular rate; ventricular—varies with block
- **P wave:** Slightly abnormal; shape depends on site of ectopic pacemaker
- **PR interval:** Usually normal
- **QRS complex:** Usually normal
- **T wave:** Usually indistinguishable
- **QT interval:** Possibly indiscernible
- **Other:** More than one P wave for each QRS complex

(continued)
Identifying types of atrial tachycardia (continued)

**Multifocal atrial tachycardia (MAT)**
In MAT, atrial tachycardia occurs with numerous atrial foci firing intermittently. MAT produces varying P waves on the strip and occurs most commonly in patients with chronic pulmonary disease. The irregular baseline in this strip is caused by movement of the chest wall. Look for these distinguishing characteristics.

- **Rhythm:** Atrial and ventricular—irregular
- **Rate:** Atrial—100 to 250 beats/minute, usually under 160; ventricular—101 to 250 beats/minute
- **P wave:** Configuration varies; must see at least three different P wave shapes
- **PR interval:** Variable
- **QRS Complex:** Usually normal; can be aberrant if arrhythmia persists
- **T wave:** Usually distorted
- **QT interval:** Possibly indiscernible
- **Other:** None

**Paroxysmal atrial tachycardia (PAT)**
A type of paroxysmal supraventricular tachycardia, PAT features brief periods of tachycardia that alternate with periods of normal sinus rhythm. PAT starts and stops suddenly as a result of rapid firing of an ectopic focus. It commonly follows frequent premature atrial contractions (PACs), one of which initiates the tachycardia. Look for these distinguishing characteristics.

- **Rhythm:** Regular
- **Rate:** 150 to 250 beats/minute
- **P wave:** Abnormal, possibly hidden in previous T wave
- **PR interval:** Identical for each cycle
- **QRS complex:** Possibly aberrantly conducted
- **T wave:** Usually distorted
- **QT interval:** Possibly indiscernible
- **Other:** One P wave for each QRS complex
feels palpitations. Persistent tachycardia and rapid ventricular rate cause decreased cardiac output, which can lead to blurred vision, syncope, and hypotension.

How you intervene

Treatment depends on the type of tachycardia, the width of the QRS complex, and the clinical stability of the patient. Digoxin toxicity is one of the most common causes of atrial tachycardia so assessing the patient for signs and symptoms of toxicity and monitoring serum digoxin levels is important.

Valsalva’s maneuver or carotid sinus massage may be used to treat atrial tachycardia. (See No massage for elderly patients and Understanding carotid sinus massage.) Keep in mind that vagal stimulation can result in bradycardia, ventricular arrhythmias, and

Understanding carotid sinus massage

Carotid sinus massage may be used to diagnose atrial tachycardias. Massaging the carotid sinus stimulates the vagus nerve, which then inhibits firing of the sinoatrial (SA) node and slows atrioventricular node conduction. As a result, the SA node can resume its job as primary pacemaker. Risks of carotid sinus massage include decreased heart rate, vasodilation, ventricular arrhythmias, stroke, and cardiac standstill.

No massage for elderly patients

Older adults may have undiagnosed carotid atherosclerosis and carotid bruits may be absent, even with significant disease. As a result, you shouldn’t perform carotid sinus massage in late middle-aged and older patients.
asystole. If vagal maneuvers are used, make sure that resuscitative equipment is readily available.

**Optimal treatment options**

Drug therapy may be used, including digoxin, beta-adrenergic blockers, and calcium channel blockers. When other treatments fail, or if the patient is clinically unstable, synchronized cardioversion may be used.

Atrial overdrive pacing may also be used to stop the arrhythmia. This treatment helps suppress the depolarization of the ectopic pacemaker and permits the SA node to resume its normal role.

**Monitor the strip**

When caring for a patient with atrial tachycardia, carefully monitor his rhythm. Doing so may provide information about the cause of atrial tachycardia, which can facilitate treatment. In addition, monitor the patient for chest pain, indications of decreased cardiac output, and signs and symptoms of heart failure or myocardial ischemia.

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**Atrial flutter**

Atrial flutter, a supraventricular tachycardia, is characterized by an atrial rate of 250 to 350 beats/minute, although it's generally around 300 beats/minute. Originating in a single atrial focus, this rhythm results from circus reentry and possibly increased automaticity.

On an ECG, the P waves lose their distinction due to the rapid atrial rate. The waves blend together in a saw-toothed appearance and are called *flutter waves*, or *f waves*. These waves are the hallmark of atrial flutter.

**How it happens**

Atrial flutter is commonly associated with second-degree block. In that instance, the AV node fails to allow conduction of all the impulses to the ventricles. As a result, the ventricular rate is slower.

Atrial flutter may be caused by conditions that enlarge atrial tissue and elevate atrial pressures. It’s commonly found in patients with severe mitral valve disease, hyperthyroidism, pericardial disease, and primary myocardial disease. The rhythm is also sometimes encountered in patients after cardiac surgery or in patients with acute MI, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), and systemic arterial hypoxia. Atrial flutter rarely occurs...
in healthy people. When it does, it may indicate intrinsic cardiac disease.

**Rating the ratio**

The clinical significance of atrial flutter is determined by the number of impulses conducted through the node—expressed as a conduction ratio, for example, 2:1 or 4:1—and the resulting ventricular rate. If the ventricular rate is too slow (fewer than 40 beats/minute) or too fast (more than 150 beats/minute), cardiac output can be seriously compromised.

Usually the faster the ventricular rate, the more dangerous the arrhythmia. The rapid rate reduces ventricular filling time and coronary perfusion, which can cause angina, heart failure, pulmonary edema, hypotension, and syncope.

**What to look for**

Atrial flutter is characterized by abnormal P waves that produce a saw-toothed appearance, the hallmark flutter-wave appearance. (See Identifying atrial flutter.) Varying degrees of AV block produce ventricular rates one-half to one-fourth of the atrial rate.

**Identifying atrial flutter**

This rhythm strip illustrates atrial flutter. Look for these distinguishing characteristics.

- **Rhythm:** Atrial—regular; ventricular—irregular
- **Rate:** Atrial—280 beats/minute; ventricular—60 beats/minute
- **P wave:** Classic saw-toothed appearance
- **PR interval:** Unmeasurable
- **QRS complex:** 0.08 second
- **T wave:** Unidentifiable
- **QT interval:** Unidentifiable
- **Other:** None

Saw-toothed P waves are the hallmark of atrial flutter.
The AV node usually won’t accept more than 180 impulses/minute and allows every second, third, or fourth impulse to be conducted, the ratio of which determines the ventricular rate. One of the most common rates is 150 beats/minute. With an atrial rate of 300, that rhythm is referred to as a 2:1 block. (See *Atrial flutter and sinus tachycardia*.)

The QRS complex is usually normal but may be widened if flutter waves are buried in the complex. You won’t be able to identify a T wave, nor will you be able to measure the QT interval.

The atrial rhythm may vary between fibrillatory waves and flutter waves, an arrhythmia commonly referred to as *atrial fibrillation and flutter*.

**Misleading pulses**

When caring for a patient with atrial flutter, you may note that his peripheral or apical pulse is normal in rate and rhythm. That’s because the pulse reflects the number of ventricular contractions, not the number of atrial impulses. If the ventricular rate is normal, the patient may be asymptomatic. However, if the ventricular rate is rapid, the patient may exhibit signs and symptoms of reduced cardiac output and cardiac decompensation.

**How you intervene**

If the patient is hemodynamically unstable, synchronized electrical cardioversion should be administered immediately. Cardioversion delivers electric current to the heart to correct an arrhythmia. It’s synchronized to discharge at the peak of the R wave. Synchronizing the energy current delivery with the R wave ensures that the current won’t be delivered on the vulnerable T wave, which could initiate ventricular tachycardia or ventricular fibrillation.

**Control and convert operation**

The focus of treatment for hemodynamically stable patients includes controlling the rate and converting the rhythm. Specific interventions depend on the patient’s cardiac function, whether preexcitation syndromes are involved, and the duration (less than or greater than 48 hours) of the arrhythmia.

For example, in atrial flutter with normal cardiac function and duration, direct current (DC) cardioversion may be considered; for duration greater than 48 hours, DC cardioversion wouldn’t be considered because it increases the risk of thromboembolism unless the patient has been adequately anticoagulated.
**Stay alert**

Because atrial flutter may indicate intrinsic cardiac disease, monitor the patient closely for signs and symptoms of low cardiac output. Be alert to the effects of digoxin, which depresses the SA node. If cardioversion is necessary, prepare the patient for I.V. administration of a sedative or anesthetic as ordered. Keep resuscitative equipment at the bedside. Also be alert for bradycardia because cardioversion can decrease the heart rate.

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**Atrial fibrillation**

Atrial fibrillation, sometimes called *A-fib*, is defined as chaotic, asynchronous, electrical activity in atrial tissue. It’s the most common arrhythmia, affecting an estimated 2 million people in the United States. Atrial fibrillation stems from the firing of a number of impulses in reentry pathways. As with atrial flutter, atrial fibrillation results in a loss of atrial kick. The ectopic impulses may fire at a rate of 400 to 600 times/minute, causing the atria to quiver instead of contract.

The ventricles respond only to those impulses that make it through the AV node. On an ECG, atrial activity is no longer represented by P waves but by erratic baseline waves called *fibrillatory waves*, or *f waves*. This rhythm may be either sustained or paroxysmal (occurring in bursts). It can be either preceded by or be the result of PACs.

The irregular conduction of impulses through the AV node produces a characteristic irregularly irregular ventricular response. If you see R waves that look irregularly irregular, suspect atrial fibrillation.

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**How it happens**

Atrial fibrillation occurs more commonly than atrial flutter or atrial tachycardia. Atrial fibrillation can occur following cardiac surgery, or it can be caused by long-standing hypotension, pulmonary embolism, COPD, electrolyte imbalances, mitral insufficiency, mitral stenosis, hyperthyroidism, infection, coronary artery disease, acute MI, pericarditis, hypoxia, and atrial septal defects.

The rhythm may also occur in a healthy person who uses coffee, alcohol, or nicotine to excess or who’s fatigued and under stress. Certain drugs, such as aminophylline and digoxin, may contribute to the development of atrial fibrillation. Catecholamine release during exercise may also trigger the arrhythmia.
Where have all the atrial kicks gone?

As with other atrial arrhythmias, atrial fibrillation eliminates atrial kick. That loss, combined with the decreased filling times associated with rapid rates, can lead to clinically significant problems. If the ventricular response is greater than 100 beats/minute—a condition called *uncontrolled atrial fibrillation*—the patient may develop heart failure, angina, or syncope.

Patients with preexisting cardiac disease, such as hypertrophic obstructive cardiomyopathy, mitral stenosis, rheumatic heart disease, and mitral prosthetic valves, tend to tolerate atrial fibrillation poorly and may develop shock and severe heart failure.

Left untreated, atrial fibrillation can lead to cardiovascular collapse, thrombus formation, and systemic arterial or pulmonary embolism. (See *Risk of restoring sinus rhythm.*

What to look for

Atrial fibrillation is distinguished by the absence of P waves and an irregular ventricular response. When several ectopic sites in the atria fire impulses, depolarization can't spread in an organized manner. (See *Identifying atrial fibrillation.*

Small sections of the atria are activated individually, which results in the atrial muscle quivering instead of contracting. On an ECG, you'll see uneven baseline f waves rather than clearly distinguishable P waves.

That fabulous filter

The AV node protects the ventricles from the 400 to 600 erratic atrial impulses that occur each minute by acting as a filter and blocking some of the impulses. The AV node itself doesn’t receive all the impulses, however. If muscle tissue around the AV node is in a refractory state, impulses from other areas of the atria can’t reach the AV node, which further reduces the number of atrial impulses conducted through to the ventricles.

Those two factors help explain the characteristic wide variation in R-R intervals in atrial fibrillation.

Barely measurable

The atrial rate is almost indiscernible but is usually greater than 400 beats/minute. The ventricular rate usually varies from 100 to 150 beats/minute but can be lower. When the ventricular response rate is below 100, atrial fibrillation is considered controlled. When it exceeds 100, the rhythm is considered uncontrolled.

Atrial fibrillation is called *coarse* if the f waves are pronounced and *fine* if they aren’t. Atrial fibrillation and flutter may also

Risk of restoring sinus rhythm

A patient with atrial fibrillation is at increased risk for developing atrial thrombus and systemic arterial embolism. Because the atria don’t contract, blood may pool on the atrial wall, and thrombi can form.

If normal sinus rhythm is restored and the atria contract normally, clots can break away and travel through the pulmonary or systemic circulation with potentially disastrous results.
Atrial fibrillation can occur. Look for a configuration that varies between fibrillatory waves and flutter waves.

**Pulse differences**

When caring for a patient with atrial fibrillation, you may find that the radial pulse rate is slower than the apical rate. That’s because, unlike the stronger contractions, the weaker contractions of the heart don’t produce a palpable peripheral pulse.

The pulse rhythm will be irregular. If the ventricular rate is rapid, the patient may show signs and symptoms of decreased cardiac output, including hypotension and light-headedness. His heart may be able to compensate for the decrease if the fibrillation lasts long enough to become chronic. In those cases, however, the patient is at greater-than-normal risk for developing pulmonary, cerebral, or other emboli and may exhibit signs of those conditions.

**How you intervene**

The major therapeutic goal in treating atrial fibrillation is to reduce the ventricular response rate to below 100 beats/minute. This may be accomplished either by drugs that control the ventricular
response or by cardioversion and drugs in combination to convert the rhythm to sinus.

Atrial fibrillation is treated following the same guidelines as atrial flutter.

**Timing is everything**

Electrical cardioversion is most successful if used within the first 48 hours of treatment and less successful if the rhythm has existed for a long time. If the patient shows signs of more severe angina or of decreased cardiac output, emergency measures are necessary.

When the onset of atrial fibrillation is acute and the patient can cooperate, vagal maneuvers or carotid sinus massage may slow the ventricular response but won’t convert the arrhythmia.

**Cardioversion**

A symptomatic patient needs immediate synchronized cardioversion. The patient should receive appropriate anticoagulation therapy first because cardioversion can cause emboli to form, especially in a patient with chronic or paroxysmal atrial fibrillation.

A conversion to normal sinus rhythm will cause forceful atrial contractions to resume abruptly. If a thrombus forms in the atria, the resumption of contractions can result in systemic emboli. (See *How synchronized cardioversion works.*

**How synchronized cardioversion works**

A patient whose arrhythmia causes low cardiac output and hypotension may be a candidate for synchronized cardioversion. This may be an elective or emergency procedure. For instance, it may be used to make a person with atrial fibrillation more comfortable or to save the life of a patient with ventricular tachycardia.

**Synchronize the energy**

Synchronized cardioversion is similar to defibrillation except that cardioversion generally requires lower energy levels. In synchronized cardioversion, the R wave on the patient’s electrocardiogram is synchronized with the cardioverter (defibrillator). After the firing buttons have been pressed, the cardioverter discharges energy when it senses the next R wave.

**When the stimulus hits**

To stop atrial depolarization and reestablish normal sinus rhythm, stimulation must occur during the R wave. Stimulation that hits a T wave increases the risk of fatal arrhythmias. Keep in mind that there’s a slight delay between the time the firing button is pressed and the moment the energy is actually discharged. Call, “All clear,” and then hold the paddles to the patient’s chest until the energy is actually discharged.

**Digoxin toxicity warning**

Be aware that synchronized cardioversion carries the risk of lethal arrhythmias when used in patients with digoxin toxicity.
Reestablishing its role

Drugs, such as digoxin, procainamide, propranolol (Inderal), quinidine, amiodarone (Cordarone), and verapamil (Calan) can be given after successful cardioversion to maintain normal sinus rhythm and to control the ventricular rate in chronic atrial fibrillation. Some of these drugs prolong the atrial refractory period, giving the SA node an opportunity to reestablish its role as the heart’s pacemaker, whereas others primarily slow AV node conduction, controlling the ventricular rate. Symptomatic atrial fibrillation that doesn’t respond to routine treatment may be treated with radiofrequency ablation therapy.

When assessing a patient with atrial fibrillation, assess both the peripheral and apical pulses. If the patient isn’t on a cardiac monitor, be alert for an irregular pulse and differences in the apical and radial pulse rates.

Assess for symptoms of decreased cardiac output and heart failure. If drug therapy is used, monitor serum drug levels and observe the patient for evidence of toxicity. Tell the patient to report pulse rate changes, syncope or dizziness, chest pain, or signs of heart failure, such as increasing dyspnea and peripheral edema.

Wandering pacemaker

A wandering pacemaker is an irregular rhythm that results when the heart’s pacemaker changes its focus from the SA node to another area above the ventricles. The origin of the impulse may wander beat-to-beat from the SA node to other atrial sites or to the AV junction. The P wave and PR interval vary from beat to beat as the pacemaker site changes.

How it happens

Wandering pacemaker may be caused by:
- increased vagal tone
- digoxin toxicity
- organic heart disease such as rheumatic carditis.

The arrhythmia may be normal in young patients and is common in athletes who have slow heart rates. It may be difficult to identify because the arrhythmia is commonly transient. Although wandering pacemaker is rarely serious, chronic arrhythmias are a sign of heart disease and should be monitored.
What to look for

The rhythm on an ECG strip will look slightly irregular because sites of impulse initiation vary. The rate is usually normal—60 to 100 beats/minute—but it may be slower. The P waves change shape as the pacemaker site changes.

Impulses may originate in the SA node, atria, or AV junction. If an impulse originates in the AV junction, the P wave may come before, during, or after the QRS complex. The PR interval will also vary from beat to beat as the pacemaker site changes, but it will always be less than 0.20 second.

Mind the PRs and QRSs

The variation in PR interval will cause a slightly irregular R-R interval. If the impulse originates in the AV junction, the PR interval will be less than 0.12 second. Ventricular depolarization is normal, so the QRS complex will be less than 0.12 second. The T wave and QT interval will usually be normal, although the QT interval can vary. (See Identifying wandering pacemaker.)

Patients are generally asymptomatic and unaware of the arrhythmia. The pulse rate and rhythm may be normal or irregular.

Identifying wandering pacemaker

This rhythm strip illustrates wandering pacemaker. Look for these distinguishing characteristics.

- **Rhythm**: Atrial and ventricular—irregular
- **Rate**: Atrial and ventricular—50 beats/minute
- **P wave**: Changes in size and shape; first P wave inverted, second upright
- **PR interval**: Variable
- **QRS complex**: 0.08 second
- **T wave**: Normal
- **QT interval**: 0.44 second
- **Other**: None
How you intervene

Usually, no treatment is needed. If the patient is symptomatic, however, the underlying cause should be treated.

You’ll need to monitor the patient’s heart rhythm and assess for signs of hemodynamic instability. Also assess blood pressure, mental status, and skin color.

That’s a wrap!

Atrial arrhythmias review

PACs

Characteristics
- Rhythms: Irregular as a result of PACs
- P wave: Premature with an abnormal configuration; may be buried in the previous T wave
- PR interval: Usually normal; may be slightly shortened or prolonged
- QRS complex: Similar to the underlying QRS complex when PAC is conducted; may not follow the premature P wave when a nonconducted PAC occurs

Treatment
- No treatment if asymptomatic
- Correction of the underlying cause
- Drugs, such as digoxin, procainamide, and quinidine, to prolong the atrial refractory period

Atrial tachycardia

Characteristics
- Rhythms: Atrial—regular, irregular in MAT; ventricular—regular when the block is constant and irregular when it isn’t
- Rates: Atrial—three or more successive ectopic atrial beats at a rate of 150 to 250 beats/minute; ventricular—varies
- P wave: A 1:1 ratio with QRS complex (unless a block is present); may not be discernible; may be hidden in previous ST segment or T wave; in MAT, at least three different P waves seen
- PR interval: Sometimes not measurable; varies in MAT
- QRS complex: Usually normal
- T wave: Normal or inverted
- QT interval: Usually within normal limits; may be shorter
- ST-segment and T-wave changes: Sometimes with ischemia

Treatment
- Correction of underlying cause
- Monitoring of blood digoxin levels for toxicity

(continued)
Atrial arrhythmias review (continued)

- Valsalva’s maneuver or carotid sinus massage
- Calcium channel blocker, beta-adrenergic blocker, or digoxin; synchronized cardioversion
- Atrial overdrive pacing to stop arrhythmia

Atrial flutter

**Characteristics**
- **Rhythms:** Atrial—regular; ventricular—depends on the AV conduction pattern
- **Rates:** Atrial usually greater than ventricular
- **P waves:** Abnormal with saw-toothed appearance
- **QRS complex:** Usually normal; may be widened if waves are buried in complex
- **T wave:** Unidentifiable
- **QT interval:** Unmeasurable

**Treatment**
- Anticoagulation therapy before converting rhythm if flutter is present for more than 48 hours
- Digoxin, diltiazem, or amiodarone to control rate if heart function is impaired; synchronized cardioversion or amiodarone to convert rhythm if less than 48 hours

Atrial fibrillation

**Characteristics**
- **Rhythms:** Irregularly irregular
- **Rates:** Atrial—usually greater than 400 beats/minute; ventricular—varies from 100 to 150 beats/minute but can be lower
- **P waves:** Absent
- **f waves:** Seen as uneven baseline on ECG rather than distinguishable P waves
- **R-R intervals:** Wide variation

**Treatment**
- Same guidelines as for atrial flutter

Wandering pacemaker

**Characteristics**
- **Rhythms:** Irregular
- **Rates:** Usually normal or below 60 beats/minute
- **P wave:** Changes in size and shape
- **PR interval:** Varies; always less than 0.20 second
- **QRS complex:** Usually normal; less than 0.12 second
- **QT interval:** Sometimes varies

**Treatment**
- No treatment if asymptomatic
- Correction of the underlying cause

Quick quiz

1. The hallmark of a PAC is:
   A. regular atrial rhythm.
   B. premature, abnormally shaped P wave.
   C. P wave followed by an aberrantly conducted QRS complex.
   D. regular ventricular rhythm.
Answer: B. Because PACs originate outside the SA node, the P wave comes earlier in the cycle and has a different configuration than the sinus P wave.

2. In atrial flutter, the key consideration in determining treatment is the:
   A. atrial rate.
   B. ventricular rate.
   C. configuration of the flutter waves.
   D. QT interval.

   Answer: B. If the ventricular rate is too fast or too slow, cardiac output will be compromised. A rapid ventricular rate may require immediate cardioversion.

3. In controlled atrial fibrillation, the ventricular response rate is:
   A. less than 60 beats/minute.
   B. less than or equal to 100 beats/minute.
   C. greater than 100 beats/minute.
   D. greater than 120 beats/minute.

   Answer: B. Atrial fibrillation with a ventricular response rate less than or equal to 100 is considered controlled and usually requires no treatment. A rate greater than 100 is considered uncontrolled and may require cardioversion or other treatment.

4. Carotid sinus massage is used to:
   A. prevent the continued development of PACs.
   B. increase the ventricular rate in AV block.
   C. convert atrial tachycardia to sinus rhythm.
   D. suppress the development of flutter waves.

   Answer: C. Carotid sinus massage triggers atrial standstill by inhibiting firing of the SA node and slowing AV conduction. This allows the SA node to reestablish itself as the primary pacemaker. In atrial flutter, the technique may increase the block and slow the ventricular rate but won’t convert the rhythm.

5. For atrial fibrillation, electrical cardioversion is most successful if used:
   A. during the first 48 hours after the onset of the arrhythmia.
   B. during the first 2 weeks of treatment for the arrhythmia.
   C. during the first 4 months after the onset of the arrhythmia.
   D. anytime during the first year after the onset of the arrhythmia.

   Answer: A. Electrical cardioversion is most successful if used within the first 48 hours of treatment and less successful if the rhythm has existed for a long time.
6. In a patient with wandering pacemaker, the ECG strip will show:
   A. an early beat causing irregularity.
   B. a regular rhythm of 40 beats/minute.
   C. slight irregularity because sites of impulse initiation vary.
   D. a regular rhythm and a rate of 60 to 100 beats/minute.

Answer: C. Wandering pacemaker is an irregular rhythm that results when the heart’s pacemaker changes its focus from the SA node to another area above the ventricles. So, the rhythm on the ECG strip will look slightly irregular due to the variation of the impulse sites.

**Test strips**

Try these test strips. Interpret each strip using the 8-step method and fill in the blanks below with the particular characteristics of the strip. Then compare your answers with the answers given.

**Strip 1**


**Strip 2**

| _ | _ | _ | _ | _ | _ | _ | _ | _ | _ | _ |
Atrial rhythm: ________________________________
Ventricular rhythm: ________________________________
Atrial rate: ________________________________
Ventricular rate: ________________________________
P wave: ________________________________
PR interval: ________________________________
QRS complex: ________________________________
T wave: ________________________________
QT interval: ________________________________
Other: ________________________________
Interpretation: ________________________________

Strip 3

Atrial rhythm: ________________________________
Ventricular rhythm: ________________________________
Atrial rate: ________________________________
Ventricular rate: ________________________________
P wave: ________________________________
PR interval: ________________________________
QRS complex: ________________________________
T wave: ________________________________
QT interval: ________________________________
Other: ________________________________
Interpretation: ________________________________

Answers to test strips

1. Rhythm: Regular
   Rate: Atrial—310 beats/minute; ventricular—80 beats/minute
   P wave: Saw-toothed
   PR interval: Unmeasurable
   QRS complex: 0.08 second
   T wave: Normal configuration
   QT interval: 0.36 second
   Other: None
   Interpretation: Atrial flutter

2. Rhythm: Irregular
   Rate: Atrial and ventricular—80 beats/minute
   P wave: Normal configuration
   PR interval: 0.14 second
ATRIAL ARRHYTHMIAS

QRS complex: 0.08 second
T wave: Normal configuration
QT interval: 0.36 second
Other: PAC after every beat
**Interpretation:** Normal sinus rhythm with PACs

3. Rhythm: Irregular
Rate: Atrial—undetermined; ventricular—60 beats/minute
P wave: Absent; coarse fibrillatory waves present
PR interval: Indiscernible
QRS complex: 0.12 second
T wave: Indiscernible
QT interval: Unmeasurable
Other: None
**Interpretation:** Atrial fibrillation

**Scoring**
🌟🌟🌟 If you answered all six questions correctly and filled in all the blanks close to what we did, outstanding! You’re the MVP of the Atrial World Series.
🌟🌟 If you answered five questions correctly and filled in most of the blanks, terrific! You’re an up-and-coming power hitter, destined for the Atrial Hall of Fame.
🌟 If you answered fewer than five questions correctly and missed most of the blanks, hang in there. With a bit of batting practice, you’ll be smacking home runs outta Atrial Park in no time.
Junctional arrhythmias

Just the facts

In this chapter, you’ll learn:

♦ the proper way to identify various junctional arrhythmias
♦ the causes, significance, treatment, and nursing implications of each arrhythmia
♦ assessment findings associated with each arrhythmia
♦ interpretation of junctional arrhythmias on an ECG.

A look at junctional arrhythmias

Junctional arrhythmias originate in the atrioventricular (AV) junction—the area around the AV node and the bundle of His. The arrhythmias occur when the sinoatrial (SA) node, a higher pacemaker, is suppressed and fails to conduct impulses or when a block occurs in conduction. Electrical impulses may then be initiated by pacemaker cells in the AV junction.

Just your normal impulse

In normal impulse conduction, the AV node slows transmission of the impulse from the atria to the ventricles, which gives the atria time to contract and pump as much blood as they can into the ventricles before the ventricles contract. However, impulses aren’t always conducted normally. (See Conduction in Wolff-Parkinson-White syndrome, page 112.)

Which way did the impulse go?

Because the AV junction is located in the lower part of the right atrium near the tricuspid valve, impulses generated in this area
JUNCTIONAL ARRHYTHMIAS

cause the heart to be depolarized in an abnormal way. The impulse moves upward and causes backward, or retrograde, depolarization of the atria and inverted P waves in leads II, III, and aVF leads in which you would normally see upright P waves. (See Finding the P wave.)

The impulse also moves down toward the ventricles, causing forward, or antegrade, depolarization of the ventricles and an upright QRS complex. Arrhythmias that cause inverted P waves on an ECG may be atrial or junctional in origin.

Now I get it!

Conduction in Wolff-Parkinson-White syndrome

Conduction doesn’t always take place in a normal way. In Wolff-Parkinson-White syndrome, for example, a conduction bypass develops outside the atrioventricular (AV) junction and connects the atria with the ventricles, as shown. Wolff-Parkinson-White syndrome is typically a congenital rhythm disorder that occurs mainly in young children and in adults ages 20 to 35.

Rapidly conducted

The bypass formed in Wolff-Parkinson-White syndrome, known as the bundle of Kent, conducts impulses to the atria or the ventricles. Impulses aren’t delayed at the AV node, so conduction is abnormally fast. Retrograde conduction, circus reentry, and reentrant tachycardia can result.

Checking the ECG

This syndrome causes a shortened PR interval (less than 0.10 second) and a widened QRS complex (greater than 0.10 second). The beginning of the QRS complex may look slurred because of altered ventricular depolarization. This hallmark sign of Wolff-Parkinson-White syndrome is called a delta wave, shown in the inset.

When to treat

This syndrome must be treated if tachyarrhythmias, such as atrial fibrillation and atrial flutter, occur. First, electrophysiology studies are done to determine the location of the conduction pathway and evaluate specific treatments. Radiofrequency ablation may be used with resistant tachyarrhythmias.
A LOOK AT JUNCTIONAL ARRHYTHMIAS

Junctional mimic

Atrial arrhythmias are sometimes mistaken for junctional arrhythmias because impulses are generated so low in the atria that they cause retrograde depolarization and inverted P waves. Looking at the PR interval will help you determine whether an arrhythmia is atrial or junctional.

An arrhythmia with an inverted P wave before the QRS complex and a normal PR interval (0.12 to 0.20 second) originated in the atria. An arrhythmia with a PR interval less than 0.12 second originated in the AV junction.

Mixed signals

Finding the P wave

When the pacemaker fires in the atrioventricular junction, the impulse may reach the atria or the ventricles first. Therefore, the inverted P wave and the following QRS complex won’t have a consistent relationship. These rhythm strips show the various positions the P wave can take in junctional rhythms.

Atria first
If the atria are depolarized first, the P wave will occur before the QRS complex. Inverted P wave before QRS complex

Ventricles first
If the ventricles are depolarized first, the QRS complex will come before the P wave. Inverted P wave before QRS complex

Simultaneous
If the ventricles and atria are depolarized simultaneously, the P wave will be hidden in the QRS complex. Inverted P wave hidden in QRS complex

Don’t mistake an atrial arrhythmia for a junctional arrhythmia. Check the PR interval.
Premature junctional contraction

A premature junctional contraction (PJC) is a beat that occurs before a normal beat and causes an irregular rhythm. This ectopic beat occurs when an irritable location within the AV junction acts as a pacemaker and fires either prematurely or out of sequence.

As with all beats produced by the AV junction, the atria are depolarized in retrograde fashion, causing an inverted P wave. The ventricles are depolarized normally.

How it happens

PJCs may be caused by toxic levels of digoxin (level greater than 2.5 ng/ml), excessive caffeine intake, inferior wall myocardial infarction (MI), rheumatic heart disease, valvular disease, hypoxia, heart failure, or swelling of the AV junction after heart surgery.

The beat goes on

Although PJCs themselves usually aren’t dangerous, you’ll need to monitor the patient carefully and assess him for other signs of intrinsic pacemaker failure.

What to look for

A PJC appears on a rhythm strip as an early beat causing an irregularity. The rest of the strip may show regular atrial and ventricular rhythms, depending on the patient’s underlying rhythm.

P wave inversion

Look for an inverted P wave in leads II, III, and aVF. Depending on when the impulse occurs, the P wave may fall before, during, or after the QRS complex. (See Identifying a PJC.) If it falls during the QRS complex, it’s hidden. If it comes before the QRS complex, the PR interval is less than 0.12 second.

Because the ventricles are usually depolarized normally, the QRS complex has a normal configuration and a normal duration of less than 0.12 second. The T wave and the QT interval are usually normal.
Identifying a PJC

This rhythm strip illustrates premature junctional contraction (PJC). Look for these distinguishing characteristics.

- **Rhythm**: Irregular atrial and ventricular rhythms
- **Rate**: 100 beats/minute
- **P wave**: Inverted and precedes the QRS complex with PJC; otherwise normal configuration
- **PR interval**: 0.14 second for the underlying rhythm and 0.06 second for the PJC
- **QRS complex**: 0.06 second
- **T wave**: Normal configuration
- **QT interval**: 0.36 second
- **Other**: Pause after PJC

The rhythm is irregular.

The P wave is inverted with PR interval less than 0.12 second.

That quickening feeling

The patient may be asymptomatic or he may complain of palpitations or a feeling of quickening in the chest. You may be able to palpate an irregular pulse. If the PJCs are frequent enough, the patient may have hypotension from a transient decrease in cardiac output.

How you intervene

PJCs usually don’t require treatment unless symptoms occur. In those cases, the underlying cause should be treated. If digoxin toxicity is the culprit, the medication should be discontinued and serum digoxin (Lanoxin) levels monitored.

You should also monitor the patient for hemodynamic instability. If ectopic beats are frequent, the patient should decrease or eliminate his caffeine intake.
A junctional escape rhythm is a string of beats that occurs after a conduction delay from the atria. The normal intrinsic firing rate for cells in the AV junction is 40 to 60 beats/minute.

Remember that the AV junction can take over as the heart’s pacemaker if higher pacemaker sites slow down or fail to fire or conduct. The junctional escape beat is an example of this compensatory mechanism. Because junctional escape beats prevent ventricular standstill, they should never be suppressed.

**Backward and upside-down**

In a junctional escape rhythm, as in all junctional arrhythmias, the atria are depolarized by means of retrograde conduction. The P waves are inverted, and impulse conduction through the ventricles is normal. (See Check age and lifestyle.)

**How it happens**

A junctional escape rhythm can be caused by any condition that disturbs SA node function or enhances AV junction automaticity. Causes of the arrhythmia include:
- sick sinus syndrome
- vagal stimulation
- digoxin toxicity
- inferior wall MI
- rheumatic heart disease.

**The great escape**

Whether junctional escape rhythm harms the patient depends on how well the patient’s heart tolerates a decreased heart rate and decreased cardiac output. The less tolerant the heart is, the more significant the effects of the arrhythmia.

**What to look for**

A junctional escape rhythm shows a regular rhythm of 40 to 60 beats/minute on an ECG strip. Look for inverted P waves in leads II, III, and aVF.

The P waves occur before, after, or hidden within the QRS complex. The PR interval is less than 0.12 second and is measurable only if the P wave comes before the QRS complex. (See Identifying junctional escape rhythm.)

The rest of the ECG waveform—including the QRS complex, T wave, and QT interval—should appear normal because impulses through the ventricles are usually conducted normally.
It may be slow, but at least it’s regular

A patient with a junctional escape rhythm has a slow, regular pulse rate of 40 to 60 beats/minute. The patient may be asymptomatic. However, pulse rates less than 60 beats/minute may lead to inadequate cardiac output, causing hypotension, syncope, or decreased urine output.

How you intervene

Treatment for a junctional escape rhythm involves correcting the underlying cause; for example, digoxin may be withheld. Atropine may be given to increase the heart rate, or a temporary or permanent pacemaker may be inserted if the patient is symptomatic.

Nursing care includes monitoring the patient’s serum digoxin and electrolyte levels and watching for signs of decreased cardiac output, such as hypotension, syncope, or decreased urine output. If the patient is hypotensive, lower the head of his bed as far as he can tolerate it and keep atropine at the bedside. Discontinue digoxin if indicated.
Accelerated junctional rhythm

An accelerated junctional rhythm is caused by an irritable focus in the AV junction that speeds up to take over as the heart’s pacemaker. The atria are depolarized by means of retrograde conduction, and the ventricles are depolarized normally. The accelerated rate is usually between 60 and 100 beats/minute.

How it happens

Conditions that affect SA node or AV node automaticity can cause accelerated junctional rhythm. These conditions include:
- digoxin toxicity
- hypokalemia
- inferior or posterior wall MI
- rheumatic heart disease
- valvular heart disease.

Getting a kick out of it

This arrhythmia is significant if the patient has symptoms of decreased cardiac output—hypotension, syncope, and decreased

Identifying accelerated junctional rhythm

This rhythm strip illustrates accelerated junctional rhythm. Look for these distinguishing characteristics.

- Rhythm: Regular
- Rate: 80 beats/minute
- P wave: Absent
- PR interval: Unmeasurable
- QRS complex: 0.10 second
- T wave: Normal
- QT interval: 0.32 second
- Other: None
urine output. These can occur if the atria are depolarized after the QRS complex, which prevents blood ejection from the atria into the ventricles, or atrial kick.

What to look for

With an accelerated junctional rhythm, look for a regular rhythm and a rate of 60 to 100 beats/minute. (See Identifying accelerated junctional rhythm.) If the P wave is present, it will be inverted in leads II, III, and aV\textsubscript{F} and will occur before or after the QRS complex or be hidden in it. If the P wave comes before the QRS complex, the PR interval will be less than 0.12 second. The QRS complex, T wave, and QT interval all appear normal. (See Escape rate higher in young children.)

Low-down, dizzy, and confused

The patient may be asymptomatic because accelerated junctional rhythm has the same rate as sinus rhythm. However, if cardiac output is low, the patient may become dizzy, hypotensive, and confused and have weak peripheral pulses.

How you intervene

Treatment for accelerated junctional arrhythmia involves correcting the underlying cause. Nursing interventions include observing the patient to see how well he tolerates this arrhythmia, monitoring his serum digoxin level, and withholding his digoxin dose as ordered. You should also assess potassium and other electrolyte levels and administer supplements as ordered; monitor vital signs for hemodynamic instability; and observe for signs of decreased cardiac output. Temporary pacing may be necessary if the patient is symptomatic.

Junctional tachycardia

In junctional tachycardia, three or more PJCs occur in a row. This supraventricular tachycardia occurs when an irritable focus from the AV junction has enhanced automaticity, overriding the SA node to function as the heart’s pacemaker.

In this arrhythmia, the atria are depolarized by means of retrograde conduction, and conduction through the ventricles is normal. The rate is usually 100 to 200 beats/minute. (See Identifying junctional tachycardia, page 120.)
JUNCTIONAL ARRHYTHMIAS

How it happens

Possible causes of junctional tachycardia include:
- digoxin toxicity (most common cause), which can be enhanced by hypokalemia
- inferior or posterior wall MI or ischemia
- congenital heart disease in children
- swelling of the AV junction after heart surgery.

Compromisin’ rhythm

The significance of junctional tachycardia depends on the rate, underlying cause, and severity of the accompanying cardiac disease. At higher ventricular rates, junctional tachycardia may compromise cardiac output by decreasing the amount of blood filling the ventricles with each beat. Higher rates also result in the loss of atrial kick.

What to look for

When assessing a rhythm strip for junctional tachycardia, look for a rate of 100 to 200 beats/minute. The P wave is inverted in leads II, III, and aVF and can occur before, during (hidden P wave), or after the QRS complex.
Measurement of the PR interval depends on whether the P wave falls before, in, or after the QRS complex. If it comes before the QRS complex, the only time the PR interval can be measured, it will always be less than 0.12 second.

The QRS complexes look normal, as does the T wave, unless a P wave occurs in it or the rate is so fast that the T wave can’t be detected. (See Junctional and supraventricular tachycardia.)

**Rapid rate = instability**

Patients with rapid heart rates may have decreased cardiac output and hemodynamic instability. The pulse will be rapid, and dizziness, low blood pressure, and other signs of decreased cardiac output may be present.

**How you intervene**

The underlying cause should be treated. If the cause is digoxin toxicity, the digoxin should be discontinued. Vagal maneuvers and medications such as verapamil may slow the heart rate for the symptomatic patient. (See Comparing junctional rates.)

If the patient recently had an MI or heart surgery, he may need a temporary pacemaker to reset the heart’s rhythm. A child with a permanent arrhythmia may be resistant to drug therapy and require surgery. The patient with recurrent junctional tachycardia

**Comparing junctional rates**

The names given to junctional rhythms vary according to rate. The illustration below shows how each rhythm’s name and rate are correlated.

**Junctional and supraventricular tachycardia**

If a tachycardia has a narrow QRS complex, you may have trouble deciding whether its source is junctional or atrial. When the rate approaches 150 beats/minute, a formerly visible P wave is hidden in the previous T wave, so you won’t be able to use the P wave to determine where the rhythm originated.

In these cases, call the rhythm supraventricular tachycardia, a general term that refers to the origin as being above the ventricles. Examples of supraventricular tachycardia include atrial flutter, multifocal atrial tachycardia, and junctional tachycardia.
JUNCTIONAL ARRHYTHMIAS

may be treated with ablation therapy, followed by permanent pacemaker insertion.

Monitor patients with junctional tachycardia for signs of decreased cardiac output. You should also check serum digoxin and potassium levels and administer potassium supplements, as ordered. If symptoms are severe and digoxin is the culprit, the practitioner may order digoxin immune fab, a digoxin-binding drug.

That’s a wrap!

Junctional arrhythmias review

Overview of junctional arrhythmias
- Originate in the AV junction
- Occur when the SA node is suppressed or conduction is blocked
- Impulses cause retrograde depolarization and inverted P waves in leads II, III, and aVF

Wolff-Parkinson-White syndrome
Characteristics
- PR interval: Less than 0.10 second
- QRS complex: Greater than 0.10 second; beginning of complex may have slurred appearance (delta wave)

Treatment
- No treatment if asymptomatic
- Treatment of tachyarrhythmias as indicated
- Radiofrequency ablation if resistant to other treatments

PJC
Characteristics
- Rhythms: Irregular with PJC appearance
- Rates: Vary with underlying rhythm
- P wave: Inverted; occurs before, during, or after QRS complex; may be absent
- PR interval: Less than 0.12 second or unmeasurable
- QRS complex: Usually normal

Wolff-Parkinson-White syndrome
Characteristics
- PR interval: Less than 0.10 second
- QRS complex: Greater than 0.10 second; beginning of complex may have slurred appearance (delta wave)

Treatment
- No treatment if asymptomatic
- Correction of the underlying cause
- Discontinuation of digoxin if indicated
- Reduction or elimination of caffeine intake

Junctional escape rhythm
Characteristics
- Rhythms: Regular
- Rates: 40 to 60 beats/minute
- P wave: Inverted in leads II, III, and aVF; can occur before, during, or after QRS complex
- PR interval: Less than 0.12 second if P wave comes before QRS complex
- QRS complex: Normal; less than 0.12 second
- T wave: Normal
- QT interval: Normal

Treatment
- Correction of the underlying cause
- Atropine for symptomatic bradycardia
- Temporary or permanent pacemaker insertion if arrhythmia refractory to drugs
- Discontinuation of digoxin if indicated
Quick quiz

1. In a junctional escape rhythm, the P wave can occur:
   A. within the T wave.
   B. on top of the preceding Q wave.
   C. before, during, or after the QRS complex.
   D. earlier than expected.

   Answer: C. In all junctional arrhythmias, the P wave is inverted in leads II, III, and aVF and may appear before, during, or after the QRS complex.

2. In an accelerated junctional rhythm, the QRS complex appears:
   A. narrowed.
   B. widened.
   C. damped.
   D. normal.

   Answer: A. In all accelerated junctional rhythms, the QRS complex is usually normal.
Answer: D. Because the ventricles are usually depolarized normally in this rhythm, the QRS complex has a normal configuration and a normal duration of less than 0.12 second.

3. The normal slowing of impulses as they pass through the AV node allows the atria to:
   A. fill completely with blood from the venae cavae.
   B. pump the maximum amount of blood possible into the ventricles.
   C. remain insensitive to ectopic impulse formation outside the sinus node.
   D. contract simultaneously.

Answer: B. In normal impulse conduction, the AV node slows impulse transmission from the atria to the ventricles and allows the atria to pump as much blood as possible into the ventricles before the ventricles contract.

4. If the ventricles are depolarized first in a junctional rhythm, the P wave will:
   A. appear before the QRS complex.
   B. appear within the QRS complex.
   C. appear after the QRS complex.
   D. not be apparent.

Answer: C. If the ventricles are depolarized first, the P wave will come after the QRS complex.

Test strips

Try these test strips. Interpret each strip using the 8-step method and fill in the blanks below with the particular characteristics of the strip. Then compare your answers with the answers given.

Strip 1

Atrial rhythm: ________________  QRS complex: ________________
Ventricular rhythm: ________________  T wave: ________________
Atrial rate: ________________  QT interval: ________________
Ventricular rate: ________________  Other: ________________
P wave: ________________  Interpretation: ________________
PR interval: ________________
Quick Quiz

Strip 2

Atrial rhythm: ________________  QRS complex: ________________
Ventricular rhythm: ___________  T wave: _____________________
Atrial rate: ___________________  QT interval: __________________
Ventricular rate: ______________  Other: _______________________
P wave: ______________________
PR interval: __________________

Interpretation: ________________

Strip 3

Atrial rhythm: ________________  QRS complex: ________________
Ventricular rhythm: ___________  T wave: _____________________
Atrial rate: ___________________  QT interval: __________________
Ventricular rate: ______________  Other: _______________________
P wave: ______________________
PR interval: __________________

Interpretation: ________________

Answers to test strips

1. Rhythm: Regular
   Rate: 47 beats/minute
   P wave: Inverted
   PR interval: 0.08 second
   QRS complex: 0.06 second
   T wave: Normal configuration
   QT interval: 0.42 second
   Other: None
   Interpretation: Junctional escape rhythm
2. Rhythm: Atrial and ventricular—irregular
Rate: 40 beats/minute
P wave: Normal configuration except inverted on second complex
PR interval: 0.16 second on beat 1, 3, and 4; 0.08 second beat 2
QRS complex: 0.08 second
T wave: Tall and peaked
QT interval: 0.48 second
Other: Second beat conducted early
**Interpretation:** Sinus bradycardia with PJC's

3. Rhythm: Regular
Rate: 75 beats/minute
P wave: Abnormal within T wave
PR interval: Unmeasurable
QRS complex: 0.08 second
T wave: Distorted by P wave
QT interval: Unmeasurable
Other: None
**Interpretation:** Accelerated junctional rhythm

**Scoring**

✰✰✰ If you answered all four questions correctly and correctly filled in all the blanks, we’re impressed! Dance away to that hot new band, the Junctional Escape Rhythms.

✰✰ If you answered three questions correctly and correctly filled in most of the blanks, wow! You’ve clearly got that accelerated junctional rhythm.

✰ If you answered fewer than three questions correctly and missed most of the blanks, we still think your heart is in the right place.
Ventricular arrhythmias

Just the facts

In this chapter, you’ll learn:

♦ the proper way to identify various ventricular arrhythmias
♦ the role of the ventricles in arrhythmia formation
♦ the causes, significance, treatment, and nursing implications of each arrhythmia
♦ assessment findings associated with each arrhythmia
♦ interpretation of ventricular arrhythmias on an ECG.

A look at ventricular arrhythmias

Ventricular arrhythmias originate in the ventricles below the bundle of His. They occur when electrical impulses depolarize the myocardium using a different pathway from normal impulses.

Ventricular arrhythmias appear on an ECG in characteristic ways. The QRS complex is wider than normal because of the prolonged conduction time through the ventricles. The T wave and the QRS complex deflect in opposite directions because of the difference in the action potential during ventricular depolarization and repolarization. Also, the P wave is absent because atrial depolarization doesn’t occur.

No kick from the atria

When electrical impulses are generated from the ventricles instead of the atria, atrial kick is lost and cardiac output decreases by as much as 30%. Patients with ventricular arrhythmias may show signs and symptoms of cardiac decompensation, including hypotension, angina, syncope, and respiratory distress.
VENTRICULAR ARRHYTHMIAS

Potential to kill

Although ventricular arrhythmias may be benign, they’re potentially deadly because the ventricles are ultimately responsible for cardiac output. Rapid recognition and treatment of ventricular arrhythmias increases the chance for successful resuscitation.

Premature ventricular contraction

A premature ventricular contraction (PVC) is an ectopic beat that may occur in healthy people without causing problems. PVCs may occur singly, in clusters of two or more, or in repeating patterns, such as bigeminy or trigeminy. (See Identifying PVCs.) When PVCs occur in patients with underlying heart disease, they may indicate impending lethal ventricular arrhythmias.

How it happens

PVCs are usually caused by electrical irritability in the ventricular conduction system or muscle tissue. This irritability may be provoked by anything that disrupts normal electrolyte shifts during cell depolarization and repolarization. Conditions that can disrupt electrolyte shifts include:
- electrolyte imbalances, such as hypokalemia, hyperkalemia, hypomagnesemia, and hypocalcemia
- metabolic acidosis
- hypoxia
- myocardial ischemia and infarction
- drug intoxication, particularly cocaine, amphetamines, and tricyclic antidepressants
- enlargement of the ventricular chambers
- increased sympathetic stimulation
- myocarditis
- caffeine or alcohol ingestion
- proarrhythmic effects of some antiarrhythmics
- tobacco use.

This could get serious

PVCs are significant for two reasons. First, they can lead to more serious arrhythmias, such as ventricular tachycardia or ventricular fibrillation. The risk of developing a more serious arrhythmia increases in patients with ischemic or damaged hearts.

PVCs also decrease cardiac output, especially if the ectopic beats are frequent or sustained. Decreased cardiac output is caused by reduced ventricular diastolic filling time and a loss of
PREMATURE VENTRICULAR CONTRACTION

Don't skip this strip

Identifying PVCs

This rhythm strip illustrates premature ventricular contraction (PVC) on beats 1, 6, and 11. Look for these distinguishing characteristics.

- **Rhythm**: Irregular
- **Rate**: 120 beats/minute
- **P wave**: Absent with PVC, but present with other QRS complexes
- **Premature QRS complex appears wide and bizarre.**
- **The rhythm is irregular.**
- **PR interval**: 0.12 second in underlying rhythm
- **QRS complex**: Early with bizarre configuration and duration of 0.14 second in PVC, 0.08 second in underlying rhythm
- **T wave**: Normal; opposite direction from QRS complex with PVC
- **QT interval**: 0.28 second with underlying rhythm
- **Other**: Compensatory pause after PVC

atrial kick. The clinical impact of PVCs hinges on how well perfusion is maintained and how long the abnormal rhythm lasts.

What to look for

On the ECG strip, PVCs look wide and bizarre and appear as early beats causing atrial and ventricular irregularity. The rate follows the underlying rhythm, which is usually regular.

The P wave is usually absent. Retrograde P waves may be stimulated by the PVC and cause distortion of the ST segment. The PR interval and QT interval aren’t measurable on a premature beat, only on the normal beats.

Complex configuration

The QRS complex occurs early. Configuration of the QRS complex is usually normal in the underlying rhythm. The duration of the
QRS complex in the premature beat exceeds 0.12 second. The T wave in the premature beat has a deflection opposite that of the QRS complex.

When a PVC strikes on the downslope of the preceding normal T wave—the R-on-T phenomenon—it can trigger more serious rhythm disturbances.

The pause that compensates
A horizontal baseline called a compensatory pause may follow the T wave of the PVC. When a compensatory pause appears, the interval between two normal sinus beats containing a PVC equals two normal sinus intervals. (See Compensatory pause.) This pause occurs because the ventricle is refractory and can’t respond to the next regularly timed P wave from the sinus node. When a compensatory pause doesn’t occur, the PVC is referred to as interpolated.

PVCs all in a row
PVCs that look alike are called uniform and may originate from the same ectopic focus. These beats may also appear in patterns that can progress to more lethal arrhythmias. (See When PVCs spell danger.)

Ruling out trouble
To help determine the seriousness of PVCs, ask yourself these questions:
• How often do they occur? In patients with chronic PVCs, an increase in frequency or a change in the pattern of PVCs from the baseline rhythm may signal a more serious condition.
• What pattern do they occur in? If the ECG shows a dangerous pattern—such as paired PVCs, PVCs with more than one shape, bigeminy, or R-on-T phenomenon—the patient may require immediate treatment.
• Are they really PVCs? Make sure the complex you see is a PVC, not another, less dangerous arrhythmia. (See Deciphering PVCs.) Don’t delay treatment, however, if the patient is unstable.

Outward signs tell a story
The patient with PVCs will have a much weaker pulse wave after the premature beat and a longer-than-normal pause between pulse waves. At times, you won’t be able to palpate any pulse after the PVC. If the carotid pulse is visible, however, you may see a weaker pulse wave after the premature beat. When auscultating for heart sounds, you’ll hear an abnormally early heart sound and a diminished amplitude with each premature beat.

Patients with frequent PVCs may complain of palpitations and may also experience hypotension or syncope.
When PVCs spell danger

Here are some examples of patterns of dangerous premature ventricular contractions (PVCs).

**Paired PVCs**
Two PVCs in a row are called a pair, or *couplet* (see highlighted areas). A pair can produce ventricular tachycardia because the second depolarization usually meets refractory tissue. A salvo—three or more PVCs in a row—is considered a run of ventricular tachycardia.

**Multiform PVCs**
PVCs that look different from one another arise from different sites or from the same site with abnormal conduction (see highlighted areas). Multiform PVCs may indicate increased ventricular irritability.

**Bigeminy and trigeminy**
PVCs that occur every other beat (bigeminy) or every third beat (trigeminy) may indicate increased ventricular irritability (see highlighted areas).

Deciphering PVCs

To determine whether the rhythm you’re assessing is a premature ventricular contraction (PVC) or some other beat, ask yourself these questions:

- Are you seeing ventricular escape beats rather than PVCs? Escape beats act as a safety mechanism to protect the heart from ventricular standstill. The ventricular escape beat will be late, rather than premature.
- Are you seeing normal beats with aberrant ventricular conduction? Some supraventricular impulses may take an abnormal pathway through the ventricular conduction system, causing the QRS complex to appear abnormal. This aberrantly conducted beat will have a P wave, whereas a PVC doesn’t.
VENTRICULAR ARRHYTHMIAS

When PVCs spell danger (continued)

R-on-T phenomenon
In R-on-T phenomenon, the PVC occurs so early that it falls on the T wave of the preceding beat (see highlighted area). Because the cells haven’t fully repolarized, ventricular tachycardia or ventricular fibrillation can result.

How you intervene
If the patient is asymptomatic, the arrhythmia probably won’t require treatment. If he has symptoms or a dangerous form of PVCs, the type of treatment depends on the cause of the problem.

The practitioner may order procainamide (Procan), amiodarone (Cordarone), or lidocaine I.V. Potassium chloride may be given I.V. to correct hypokalemia, and magnesium sulfate I.V. may be given to correct hypomagnesemia. Other treatments may be aimed at adjusting drug therapy or correcting acidosis, hypothermia, or hypoxia.

Stat assessment
Patients who have recently developed PVCs need prompt assessment, especially if they have underlying heart disease or complex medical problems. Those with chronic PVCs should be observed closely for the development of more frequent PVCs or more dangerous PVC patterns.

Until effective treatment is begun, a patient with PVCs accompanied by serious symptoms should have continuous ECG monitoring and ambulate only with assistance. If the patient is discharged from the health care facility on antiarrhythmic drugs, family members should know how to contact the emergency medical service (EMS) and how to perform cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR).
Idioventricular rhythms

Called the *rhythms of last resort*, idioventricular rhythms act as safety mechanisms to prevent ventricular standstill when no impulses are conducted to the ventricles from above the bundle of His. The cells of the His-Purkinje system take over and act as the heart’s pacemaker to generate electrical impulses.

Idioventricular rhythms can occur as ventricular escape beats, idioventricular rhythm (a term used to designate a specific type of idioventricular rhythm), or accelerated idioventricular rhythm.

How it happens

Idioventricular rhythms occur when all of the heart’s other pacemakers fail to function or when supraventricular impulses can’t reach the ventricles because of a block in the conduction system. The arrhythmias may accompany third-degree heart block or be caused by:

- myocardial ischemia
- myocardial infarction (MI)
- digoxin toxicity
- beta-adrenergic blockers
- pacemaker failure
- metabolic imbalances.

**Conduction foibles and pacemaker failures**

Idioventricular rhythms signal a serious conduction defect with a failure of the primary pacemaker. The slow ventricular rate of these arrhythmias and the loss of atrial kick markedly reduce cardiac output. Patients require close observation because this problem can progress to more lethal arrhythmias. Idioventricular arrhythmias also commonly occur in dying patients.

What to look for

If just one idioventricular beat is generated, it’s called a *ventricular escape beat*. (See *Identifying idioventricular rhythm*, page 134.) The beat appears late in the conduction cycle, when the rate drops to 40 beats/minute.

Consecutive ventricular beats on the ECG strip make up idioventricular rhythm. When this arrhythmia occurs, atrial rhythm and rate can’t be determined. The ventricular rhythm is usually regular at 20 to 40 beats/minute, the inherent rate of the
VENTRICULAR ARRHYTHMIAS

ventricles. If the rate is faster, it’s called an accelerated idioventricular rhythm. (See Accelerated idioventricular rhythm.)

A telltale arrhythmia

Distinguishing characteristics of idioventricular rhythm include an absent P wave or one that can’t conduct through to the ventricles. This makes the PR interval unmeasurable.

Because of abnormal ventricular depolarization, the QRS complex has a duration of longer than 0.12 second, with a wide and bizarre configuration. The T-wave deflection will be opposite the QRS complex. The QT interval is usually prolonged, indicating delayed depolarization and repolarization.

The patient may complain of palpitations, dizziness, or light-headedness, or he may have a syncopal episode. If the arrhythmia persists, hypotension, weak peripheral pulses, decreased urine output, or confusion can occur.

Don’t skip this strip

Identifying idioventricular rhythm

This rhythm strip illustrates idioventricular rhythm. Look for these distinguishing characteristics.

- Rhythm: Regular
- Rate: Unable to determine atrial rate; ventricular rate of 35 beats/minute
- P wave: Absent
- PR interval: Unmeasurable
- QRS complex: Wide and bizarre
- T wave: Deflection opposite QRS complex
- QT interval: 0.60 second
- Other: None
IDIOVENTRICULAR RHYTHMS

How you intervene

If the patient is symptomatic, treatment should be initiated immediately to increase his heart rate, improve cardiac output, and establish a normal rhythm. Atropine may be prescribed to increase the heart rate.

If atropine isn’t effective or if the patient develops hypotension or other signs of instability, a pacemaker may be needed to reestablish a heart rate that provides enough cardiac output to perfuse organs properly. A transcutaneous pacemaker may be used in an emergency until a temporary or permanent transvenous pacemaker can be inserted. (See Transcutaneous pacemaker, page 136.)

Remember: The goal of treatment doesn’t include suppressing the idioventricular rhythm because it acts as a safety mechanism to protect the heart from standstill. Idioventricular rhythm should never be treated with lidocaine or other antiarrhythmics that would suppress that safety mechanism.

Accelerated idioventricular rhythm

An accelerated idioventricular rhythm has the same characteristics as an idioventricular rhythm except that it’s faster. The rate shown here varies between 40 and 100 beats/minute.

The rate is between 40 and 100 beats/minute.

The QRS complex is wide and bizarre.
Continuous monitoring needed

Patients with idioventricular rhythms need continuous ECG monitoring and constant assessment until treatment restores hemodynamic stability. Keep pacemaker equipment at the bedside and have atropine readily available. Enforce bed rest until a permanent system is in place for maintaining an effective heart rate.

Be sure to tell the patient and his family about the serious nature of this arrhythmia and all aspects of treatment. If a permanent pacemaker is inserted, teach the patient and his family how it works, how to recognize problems, when to contact the practitioner, and how pacemaker function will be monitored.
Ventricular tachycardia

In ventricular tachycardia, commonly called V-tach, three or more PVCs occur in a row and the ventricular rate exceeds 100 beats/minute. This arrhythmia may precede ventricular fibrillation and sudden cardiac death, especially if the patient isn’t in a health care facility.

Ventricular tachycardia is an extremely unstable rhythm. It can occur in short, paroxysmal bursts lasting fewer than 30 seconds and causing few or no symptoms. Alternatively, it can be sustained, requiring immediate treatment to prevent death, even in patients initially able to maintain adequate cardiac output.

How it happens

Ventricular tachycardia usually results from increased myocardial irritability, which may be triggered by enhanced automaticity or reentry within the Purkinje system or by PVCs initiating the R-on-T phenomenon. Conditions that can cause ventricular tachycardia include:

- myocardial ischemia
- MI
- coronary artery disease
- valvular heart disease
- heart failure
- cardiomyopathy
- electrolyte imbalances such as hypokalemia
- drug intoxication from digoxin (Lanoxin), procainamide, quinidine, or cocaine
- proarrhythmic effects of some antiarrhythmics.

Unpredictable V-tach

Ventricular tachycardia is significant because of its unpredictability and potential to cause death. A patient may be stable with a normal pulse and adequate hemodynamics or unstable with hypotension and no detectable pulse. Because of reduced ventricular filling time and the drop in cardiac output, the patient’s condition can quickly deteriorate to ventricular fibrillation and complete cardiac collapse.

What to look for

On the ECG strip, the atrial rhythm and rate can’t be determined. The ventricular rhythm is usually regular but may be slightly
irregular. The ventricular rate is usually rapid—100 to 250 beats/minute.

The P wave is usually absent but may be obscured by the QRS complex. Retrograde P waves may be present. Because the P wave can’t be seen in most cases, you can’t measure the PR interval. The QRS complex is wide and bizarre, usually with an increased amplitude and a duration of longer than 0.12 second.

**All about uniformity**

QRS complexes in monomorphic ventricular tachycardia have a uniform shape. In polymorphic ventricular tachycardia, the shape of the QRS complex constantly changes. If the T wave is visible, it occurs opposite the QRS complex. The QT interval isn’t measurable. (See **Identifying ventricular tachycardia**.)

Torsades de pointes is a special variation of polymorphic ventricular tachycardia. (See **Torsades de pointes** and **Pediatric torsades de pointes**.)

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**Don’t skip this strip**

**Identifying ventricular tachycardia**

This rhythm strip illustrates ventricular tachycardia. Look for these distinguishing characteristics.

- **Rhythm:** Regular
- **Rate:** 187 beats/minute
- **P wave:** Absent
- **PR interval:** Unmeasurable
- **QRS complex:** 0.16 second; wide and bizarre
- **T wave:** Opposite direction of QRS complex
- **QT interval:** Unmeasurable
- **Other:** None

The QRS complex is wide and bizarre.

The ventricular rate is 100 to 250 beats/minute.
Quick work prevents collapse

Although some patients have only minor symptoms at first, they still need rapid intervention and treatment to prevent cardiac collapse.

Torsades de pointes

Torsades de pointes, which means “twisting about the points,” is a special form of polymorphic ventricular tachycardia. The hallmark characteristics of this rhythm, shown below, are QRS complexes that rotate about the baseline, deflecting downward and upward for several beats.

- The rate is 150 to 250 beats/minute, usually with an irregular rhythm, and the QRS complexes are wide with changing amplitude. The P wave is usually absent.

Paroxysmal rhythm

This arrhythmia may be paroxysmal, starting and stopping suddenly, and may deteriorate into ventricular fibrillation. It should be considered when ventricular tachycardia doesn’t respond to antiarrhythmic therapy or other treatments.

Reversible causes

The cause of this form of ventricular tachycardia is usually reversible. The most common causes are drugs that lengthen the QT interval, such as amiodarone, ibutilide, erythromycin, haloperidol, droperidol, and sotalol. Other causes include myocardial ischemia and electrolyte abnormalities, such as hypokalemia, hypomagnesemia, and hypocalcemia.

Going into overdrive

Torsades de pointes is treated by correcting the underlying cause, especially if the cause is related to specific drug therapy. The practitioner may order mechanical overdrive pacing, which overrides the ventricular rate and breaks the triggered mechanism for the arrhythmia. Magnesium sulfate may also be effective. Electrical cardioversion may be used when torsades de pointes doesn’t respond to other treatment.

Pediatric torsades de pointes

Torsades de pointes at an early age is usually due to congenital long QT syndrome. Ask the parents about a family history of sudden cardiac death or sudden infant death syndrome.
collapse. Most patients with ventricular tachycardia have weak or absent pulses. Low cardiac output will cause hypotension and a decreased level of consciousness (LOC) leading to unresponsiveness. Ventricular tachycardia may precipitate angina, heart failure, or a substantial decrease in organ perfusion.

**How you intervene**

Treatment depends on whether the patient’s pulse is detectable or undetectable. A patient with pulseless ventricular tachycardia receives the same treatment as one with ventricular fibrillation and requires immediate defibrillation and CPR. Treatment for the patient with a detectable pulse depends on whether his condition is stable or unstable and has monomorphic or polymorphic QRS complexes.

Unstable patients generally have heart rates greater than 150 beats/minute. They may also have hypotension, shortness of breath, an altered LOC, heart failure, angina, or MI—conditions that indicate cardiac decompensation. These patients are treated immediately with direct-current synchronized cardioversion.

**Typical tachycardia complex**

A hemodynamically stable patient with monomorphic ventricular tachycardia is treated differently. First, administer amiodarone following advanced cardiac life support (ACLS) protocols to correct the rhythm disturbance. If the drug doesn’t correct the disturbance, prepare the patient for synchronized cardioversion.

If the patient has polymorphic ventricular tachycardia with a normal QT interval, correct ischemia and electrolyte imbalances. Then administer beta-adrenergic blockers, lidocaine, amiodarone, or procainamide following ACLS protocol. Again, if drug therapy is unsuccessful, synchronized cardioversion is performed.

Correct electrolyte abnormalities in the patient with polymorphic ventricular tachycardia with a prolonged QT interval and administer magnesium I.V. If the rhythm persists, prepare the patient for overdrive pacing.

Patients with chronic, recurrent episodes of ventricular tachycardia who are unresponsive to drug therapy may have a cardioverter-defibrillator implanted. This device is a more permanent solution to recurrent episodes of ventricular tachycardia. (For more information about the implantable cardioverter-defibrillator [ICD], see chapter 9.)
**Always assume the worst**

Any wide QRS complex tachycardia should be treated as ventricular tachycardia until definitive evidence is found to establish another diagnosis, such as supraventricular tachycardia with abnormal ventricular conduction. *Always assume that the patient has ventricular tachycardia and treat him accordingly. Rapid intervention will prevent cardiac decompensation or the onset of more lethal arrhythmias.*

**Teacher, teacher**

Be sure to teach the patient and his family about the serious nature of this arrhythmia and the need for prompt treatment. If your patient is undergoing cardioversion, tell him he'll be given an analgesic or a sedative to help prevent discomfort.

If a patient will be discharged with an ICD or a prescription for long-term antiarrhythmic drugs, teach his family how to contact the EMS and how to perform CPR.

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**Ventricular fibrillation**

Ventricular fibrillation, commonly called V-fib, is a chaotic pattern of electrical activity in the ventricles in which electrical impulses arise from many different foci. It produces no effective muscular contraction and no cardiac output. Untreated ventricular fibrillation causes most cases of sudden cardiac death in people outside of a hospital.

**How it happens**

Causes of ventricular fibrillation include:

- myocardial ischemia
- MI
- untreated ventricular tachycardia
- underlying heart disease
- acid-base imbalance
- electric shock
- severe hypothermia
- electrolyte imbalances, such as hypokalemia, hyperkalemia, and hypercalcemia
- drug toxicity, including digoxin
- severe hypoxia.
Quivering ventricles

With ventricular fibrillation, the ventricles quiver instead of contract, so cardiac output falls to zero. If fibrillation continues, it leads to ventricular standstill and death.

What to look for

On the ECG strip, ventricular activity appears as fibrillatory waves with no recognizable pattern. Atrial rate and rhythm can’t be determined, nor can ventricular rhythm because no pattern or regularity occurs.

As a result, the ventricular rate, P wave, PR interval, QRS complex, T wave, and QT interval can’t be determined. Larger, or coarse, fibrillatory waves are easier to convert to a normal rhythm than are smaller waves because larger waves indicate a greater degree of electrical activity in the heart. (See Identifying ventricular fibrillation.)

No greater urgency

The patient in ventricular fibrillation is in full cardiac arrest, unresponsive, and without a detectable blood pressure or carotid or femoral pulse. Whenever you see a pattern resembling ventricular fibrillation, check the patient immediately, check the rhythm in another lead, and start treatment.

Be aware that other factors can mimic ventricular fibrillation on an ECG strip. Interference from an electric razor is one such mimic, as is muscle movement from shivering.

How you intervene

Defibrillation is the most effective treatment for ventricular fibrillation. (See “Pulseless arrest” in the appendix ACLS algorithms.) CPR must be performed until the defibrillator arrives to preserve oxygen supply to the brain and other vital organs. Assist with endotracheal intubation. Such drugs as epinephrine or vasopressin may help the heart respond better to defibrillation. Such drugs as amiodarone, lidocaine, procainamide, and magnesium sulfate may also be given.

A shock for life

During defibrillation, electrode paddles direct an electric current through the patient’s heart. The current causes the myocardium to depolarize, which, in turn, encourages the sinoatrial node to resume normal control of the heart’s electrical activity.
One paddle is placed to the right of the upper sternum, and one is placed over the fifth or sixth intercostal space at the left anterior axillary line. During cardiac surgery, internal paddles are placed directly on the myocardium.

Automated-external defibrillators are increasingly being used to provide early defibrillation. In this method, electrode pads are placed on the patient’s chest and a microcomputer in the unit interprets the cardiac rhythm, providing the caregiver with step-by-step
instructions on how to proceed. These defibrillators can be used by people without medical experience.

**Speed is the key**

For the patient with ventricular fibrillation, successful resuscitation requires rapid recognition of the problem and prompt defibrillation. Many health care facilities and EMS providers have established protocols based on ACLS algorithms to help health care workers initiate prompt treatment. Make sure you know where your facility keeps its emergency equipment and how to recognize and deal with lethal arrhythmias.

You’ll also need to teach your patient and his family how to contact the EMS. Family members need instruction in CPR. Teach them about long-term therapies that prevent recurrent episodes of ventricular fibrillation, including chronic antiarrhythmic drugs and implantation of an ICD.

**Asystole**

Asystole is ventricular standstill. The patient is completely unresponsive, with no electrical activity in the heart and no cardiac output. This arrhythmia results most commonly from a prolonged period of cardiac arrest without effective resuscitation. It’s extremely important to distinguish asystole from fine ventricular fibrillation, which is managed differently. Therefore, asystole must be confirmed in more than one ECG lead.

Asystole has been called the *arrhythmia of death*. The patient is in cardiopulmonary arrest. Without rapid initiation of CPR and appropriate treatment, the situation quickly becomes irreversible.

**How it happens**

Anything that causes inadequate blood flow to the heart may lead to asystole, including:

- MI
- severe electrolyte disturbances such as hyperkalemia
- massive pulmonary embolism
- prolonged hypoxemia
- severe, uncorrected acid-base disturbances
- electric shock
• drug intoxication such as cocaine overdose
• cardiac tamponade
• hypothermia.

What to look for

On the ECG strip, asystole looks like a nearly flat line (except for changes caused by chest compressions during CPR). No electrical activity is evident, except possibly P waves for a time. Atrial and ventricular activity is at a standstill, so no intervals can be measured. (See Identifying asystole.)

In the patient with a pacemaker, pacer spikes may be evident on the strip, but no P wave or QRS complex occurs in response to the stimulus.

The patient will be unresponsive, without any discernible pulse or blood pressure.

How you intervene

The immediate treatment for asystole is CPR. (See “Pulseless arrest” in the appendix ACLS algorithms.) Start CPR as soon as you determine that the patient has no pulse. Then verify the presence of asystole by checking two different ECG leads.

Don’t skip this strip

Identifying asystole

This rhythm strip illustrates asystole, the absence of electrical activity in the ventricles. Except for a few P waves or pacer spikes, nothing appears on the waveform and the line is almost flat.

The absence of electrical activity in the ventricles results in a nearly flat line.
Give repeated doses of epinephrine and atropine, as ordered. Transcutaneous pacing should be initiated as soon as possible. Subsequent treatment for asystole focuses on identifying and either treating or removing the underlying cause.

Quick recognition

Your job is to recognize this life-threatening arrhythmia and start resuscitation right away. Unfortunately, most patients with asystole can’t be resuscitated, especially after a prolonged period of cardiac arrest.

You should also be aware that pulseless electrical activity can lead to asystole. Know how to recognize this problem and treat it. (See Pulseless electrical activity.)
Overview of ventricular arrhythmias
- Originate in the ventricles, below the bundle of His
- Loss of atrial kick, decreasing cardiac output
- Potentially fatal without treatment or resuscitation

Characteristics
- QRS complex—wider than normal
- T wave and QRS complex deflect in opposite directions
- P wave is absent

Premature ventricular contraction

Characteristics
- Rhythms: Irregular during PVC; underlying rhythm may be regular
- Rates: Patterned after underlying rhythm
- P wave: Absent
- PR interval: Unmeasurable
- QRS complex: Wide and bizarre
- T wave: Opposite direction from QRS complex
- QT interval: Greater than 0.44 second

Treatment
- Correction of the underlying cause
- Discontinuation of drug that may be causing toxicity
- Correction of electrolyte imbalances
- Procainamide, lidocaine, or amiodarone if warranted

Idioventricular rhythms
- Act as safety mechanism to prevent ventricular standstill
- Occur as escape beats, idioventricular rhythm, or accelerated idioventricular rhythm

Characteristics
- Rhythms: Atrial—undetermined; ventricular—usually regular
- Rates: Atrial—unmeasurable; ventricular—20 to 40 beats/minute
- P wave: Absent
- PR interval: Unmeasurable
- QRS complex: Wide and bizarre
- T wave: Deflection opposite that of QRS complex
- QT interval: Greater than 0.44 second

Treatment
- Atropine to increase heart rate
- Temporary or permanent pacemaker if arrhythmia is refractory to drugs
- Avoidance of drugs that suppress the idioventricular rhythm, such as lidocaine and other antiarrhythmics

Ventricular tachycardia

Characteristics
- Rhythms: Atrial—can’t be determined; ventricular—regular or slightly irregular
- Rates: Atrial—can’t be determined; ventricular—100 to 250 beats/minute
- P wave: Absent or hidden by QRS complex
- PR interval: Unmeasurable
- QRS complex: Wide and bizarre, with increased amplitude; duration greater than 0.12 second
- T wave: Opposite direction of QRS complex
- Other: Possible torsades de pointes

Treatment
- ACLS protocols:
  - Amiodarone, if patient is stable with monomorphic QRS complexes and drugs are unsuccessful, cardioversion
  - Beta-adrenergic blockers, lidocaine, amiodarone, or procainamide, if patient’s ECG shows polymorphic QRS complexes and normal QT interval; cardioversion if unsuccessful

(continued)
Ventricular arrhythmias review (continued)

- Magnesium sulfate i.v. if patient shows polymorphic QRS and QT interval is prolonged, then overdrive pacing if rhythm persists (possibly also isoproterenol)
- Defibrillation; CPR, endotracheal intubation, and epinephrine or vasopressin, if patient is pulseless (possibly also consider amiodarone, lidocaine, or magnesium sulfate)
- Cardioverter-defibrillator possibly implanted for recurrent ventricular tachycardia

Torsades de pointes
- A form of polymorphic ventricular tachycardia
- Sometimes deteriorates into ventricular fibrillation

**Characteristics**
- **Rhythms:** Ventricular—irregular
- **Rates:** 150 to 250 beats/minute
- **P wave:** Usually absent
- **PR interval:** Unmeasurable
- **QRS complex:** Wide; rotates around the baseline; deflection downward and upward for several beats

**Treatment**
- Correction of the underlying cause
- Discontinuation of offending drug (usually one that lengthens the QT interval)
- Overdrive pacing
- Magnesium sulfate sometimes effective
- Cardioversion if unresponsive to other treatment

Ventricular fibrillation
- Electrical impulses arise from many different foci in the ventricles
- Produces no effective muscular contraction and no cardiac output
- If untreated, it causes most cases of sudden cardiac death out of hospital

**Characteristics**
- **Rhythms:** Can’t be determined
- **Rates:** Can’t be determined
- **P wave:** Can’t be determined
- **PR interval:** Can’t be determined

- **QRS complex:** Can’t be determined
- **T wave:** Can’t be determined
- **QT interval:** Isn’t applicable
- **Other:** Variations in size of fibrillatory waves

**Treatment**
- ACLS protocols:
  - Defibrillation
  - Initiation of CPR
  - Endotracheal intubation and administration of epinephrine or vasopressin (consider amiodarone, lidocaine, magnesium sulfate, or procainamide)
  - Implantation of cardioverter-defibrillator if patient is at risk for recurrent ventricular fibrillation

Asystole
- Characterized by ventricular standstill and cardiac arrest
- Fatal without prompt CPR and treatment

**Characteristics**
- Lack of electrical activity seen on ECG as a nearly flat line

**Treatment**
- ACLS protocols:
  - Initiation of CPR
  - Epinephrine
  - Atropine for bradycardia
  - Correction of the underlying cause
Quick quiz

1. PVCs are most dangerous if they:
   A. are multiformed and increase in frequency.
   B. appear wide and bizarre.
   C. occur after the T wave.
   D. are uniform and wide.

   Answer: A. PVCs that have different shapes (multiformed) and increase in frequency may signal increased ventricular irritability and progress to a lethal arrhythmia.

2. The treatment of choice for a patient with ventricular fibrillation is:
   A. defibrillation.
   B. transesophageal pacing.
   C. synchronized cardioversion.
   D. administration of epinephrine.

   Answer: A. Patients with ventricular fibrillation are in cardiac arrest and require defibrillation.

3. Patients with a slow idioventricular rhythm that doesn’t respond to atropine should receive:
   A. lidocaine.
   B. dobutamine.
   C. synchronized cardioversion.
   D. transcutaneous pacing.

   Answer: D. Transcutaneous pacing is a temporary way to increase the rate and ensure adequate cardiac output.

4. A compensatory pause occurs after a PVC because the:
   A. atria conduct a retrograde impulse.
   B. ventricle is refractory at that point.
   C. bundle of His blocks sinus impulses to the ventricles.
   D. atria are refractory and can’t respond.

   Answer: B. A compensatory pause occurs because the ventricle is refractory and can’t respond to the next regularly timed P wave from the sinus node.
5. The term *pulseless electrical activity* refers to a condition in which there’s:
   A. an extremely slow heart rate but no pulse.
   B. asystole on a monitor or rhythm strip.
   C. electrical activity in the heart but no actual contraction.
   D. asystole and a palpable pulse and blood pressure.

*Answer:* C. Pulseless electrical activity is electrical activity without mechanical contraction. The patient is in cardiac arrest, with no blood pressure or pulse.

**Test strips**

Ready for a few test strips? Interpret the two strips below using the 8-step method. Fill in the blanks below with the particular characteristics of the strip and then check your answers with ours.

**Strip 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Atrial rhythm:</th>
<th>________________</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ventricular rhythm:</td>
<td>____________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atrial rate:</td>
<td>____________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ventricular rate:</td>
<td>____________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P wave:</td>
<td>____________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PR interval:</td>
<td>____________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QRS complex:</td>
<td>____________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T wave:</td>
<td>____________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QT interval:</td>
<td>____________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other:</td>
<td>____________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interpretation:</strong></td>
<td>____________________</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Quick Quiz**

**Strip 2**

Atrial rhythm: __________________________
Ventricular rhythm: __________________________
Atrial rate: __________________________
Ventricular rate: __________________________
P wave: __________________________
PR interval: __________________________
QRS complex: __________________________
T wave: __________________________
QT interval: __________________________
Other: __________________________
Interpretation: __________________________

**Answers to test strips**

1. Rhythm: Irregular ventricular rhythm  
   Rate: Ventricular rate is 130 beats/minute  
   P wave: Absent  
   PR interval: Unmeasurable  
   QRS complex: Wide and bizarre with varying duration  
   T wave: Opposite QRS complex  
   QT interval: Unmeasurable  
   Other: None  
   **Interpretation:** Ventricular tachycardia

2. Rhythm: Chaotic ventricular rhythm  
   Rate: Can't be determined  
   P wave: Indiscernible  
   PR interval: Indiscernible  
   QRS complex: Indiscernible  
   T wave: Indiscernible  
   QT interval: Indiscernible  
   Other: None  
   **Interpretation:** Ventricular fibrillation
Scoring

☆☆☆ If you answered all five questions correctly and filled in all the blanks as we did, sensational! You’re simply V-best.

☆☆ If you answered four questions correctly and filled in most of the blanks pretty much as we did, super! You’ve got a great eye for those tricky ventricular rhythms.

☆ If you answered fewer than four questions correctly and missed most of the blanks, that’s okay. Read this chapter again and you’ll get de pointes.

Keep going…you’re halfway through this book!
Atrioventricular blocks

Just the facts

In this chapter, you’ll learn:
- the proper way to identify the various forms of atrioventricular (AV) block and interpret their rhythms
- the reason that AV block is a significant arrhythmia
- patients who are at risk for developing AV block
- signs and symptoms of AV block
- nursing care for patients with AV block.

A look at AV block

Atrioventricular (AV) heart block results from an interruption in the conduction of impulses between the atria and ventricles. AV block can be total or partial or it may delay conduction. The block can occur at the AV node, the bundle of His, or the bundle branches.

The heart’s electrical impulses normally originate in the sino-atrial (SA) node, so when those impulses are blocked at the AV node, atrial rates are commonly normal (60 to 100 beats/minute). The clinical effect of the block depends on how many impulses are completely blocked, how slow the ventricular rate is as a result, and how the block ultimately affects the heart. A slow ventricular rate can decrease cardiac output, possibly causing light-headedness, hypotension, and confusion.

The cause before the block

Various factors can lead to AV block, including underlying heart conditions, use of certain drugs, congenital anomalies, and conditions that disrupt the cardiac conduction system. (See Causes of AV block, page 154.)
### Causes of AV block

Atrioventricular (AV) blocks can be temporary or permanent. Here’s a look at causes of each kind of AV block.

#### Causes of temporary block
- Myocardial infarction (MI), usually inferior wall MI
- Digoxin (Lanoxin) toxicity
- Acute myocarditis
- Calcium channel blockers
- Beta-adrenergic blockers
- Cardiac surgery

#### Causes of permanent block
- Changes associated with aging
- Congenital abnormalities
- MI, usually anteroseptal MI
- Cardiomyopathy
- Cardiac surgery

Typical examples include:
- myocardial ischemia, which impairs cellular function so cells repolarize more slowly or incompletely. The injured cells, in turn, may conduct impulses slowly or inconsistently. Relief of the ischemia can restore normal function to the AV node.
- myocardial infarction (MI), in which cell death occurs. If the necrotic cells are part of the conduction system, they no longer conduct impulses and a permanent AV block occurs.
- excessive dosage of, or an exaggerated response to, a drug which can cause AV block or increase the likelihood that a block will develop. Although many antiarrhythmic medications can have this effect, the drugs more commonly known to cause or exacerbate AV blocks include digoxin, beta-adrenergic blockers, and calcium channel blockers.
- congenital anomalies such as congenital ventricular septal defect that involve cardiac structures and affect the conduction system. Anomalies of the conduction system, such as an AV node that doesn’t conduct impulses, can also occur in the absence of structural defects. (See AV block in elderly patients.)

### Under the knife

AV block may also be caused by inadvertent damage to the heart’s conduction system during cardiac surgery. Damage is most likely to occur in surgery involving the mitral or tricuspid valve or in the closure of a ventricular septal defect. If the injury involves tissues

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**AV block in elderly patients**

In elderly patients, atrioventricular (AV) block may be due to fibrosis of the conduction system. Other causes include use of digoxin and the presence of aortic valve calcification.
adjacent to the surgical site and the conduction system isn't physically disrupted, the block may be only temporary. If a portion of the conduction system itself is severed, a permanent block results.

**Radio blackout**

Similar disruption of the conduction system can occur from a procedure called radiofrequency ablation. In this invasive procedure, a transvenous catheter is used to locate the area within the heart that participates in initiating or perpetuating certain tachyarrhythmias.

Radiofrequency energy is then delivered to the myocardium through this catheter to produce a small area of necrosis. The damaged tissue can no longer cause or participate in the tachyarrhythmia. If the energy is delivered close to the AV node, bundle of His, or bundle branches, block can occur.

**Degrees of block**

AV blocks are classified according to their severity, not their location. That severity is measured according to how well the node conducts impulses and is separated by degrees—first, second, and third. Let’s take a look at them one at a time.

**First-degree AV block**

First-degree AV block occurs when impulses from the atria are consistently delayed during conduction through the AV node. Conduction eventually occurs; it just takes longer than normal. It’s as if people are walking in a line through a doorway, but each person hesitates before crossing the threshold.

**How it happens**

First-degree AV block may appear normally in a healthy person or result from myocardial ischemia or infarction, myocarditis, or degenerative changes in the heart. The condition may also be caused by medications, such as digoxin, calcium channel blockers, and beta-adrenergic blockers.

First-degree AV block may be temporary, particularly if it stems from medications or ischemia early in the course of an MI. The presence of first-degree block, the least dangerous type of AV block, indicates some kind of problem in the conduction system.
Because first-degree AV block can progress to a more severe block, it should be monitored for changes.

**What to look for**

In general, a rhythm strip with this block looks like normal sinus rhythm except that the PR interval is longer than normal. (See *Identifying first-degree AV block.*) The rhythm will be regular, with one normal P wave for every QRS complex.

The PR interval will be greater than 0.20 second and will be consistent for each beat. The QRS complex is usually normal, although sometimes a bundle-branch block may occur along with first-degree AV block and cause a widening of the QRS complex.

**No signs of block**

Most patients with first-degree AV block show no symptoms of the block because cardiac output isn’t significantly affected. If the PR interval is extremely long, a longer interval between S₁ and S₂ may be noted on cardiac auscultation.
How you intervene

Usually, just the underlying cause will be treated, not the conduction disturbance itself. For example, if a medication is causing the block, the dosage may be reduced or the medication may be discontinued. Close monitoring helps to detect progression of first-degree AV block to a more serious form of block.

When caring for a patient with first-degree AV block, evaluate him for underlying causes that can be corrected, such as medications or ischemia. Observe the ECG for progression of the block to a more severe form of block. Administer digoxin, calcium channel blockers, or beta-adrenergic blockers cautiously.

Type I second-degree AV block

Also called Mobitz type I block, type I second-degree AV block occurs when each successive impulse from the SA node is delayed slightly longer than the previous impulse. That pattern continues until an impulse fails to be conducted to the ventricles, and the cycle then repeats. It’s like a line of people trying to get through a doorway, each one taking longer and longer until finally one can’t get through.

How it happens

Causes of type I second-degree AV block include coronary artery disease, inferior wall MI, and rheumatic fever. It may also be due to cardiac medications, such as beta-adrenergic blockers, digoxin, and calcium channel blockers. Increased vagal stimulation can also cause this type of block.

Type I second-degree AV block may occur normally in an otherwise healthy person. Almost always temporary, this type of block resolves when the underlying condition is corrected. Although an asymptomatic patient with this block has a good prognosis, the block may progress to a more serious form, especially if it occurs early during an MI.

What to look for

When monitoring a patient with type I second-degree AV block, you’ll note that because the SA node isn’t affected by this lower block, it continues its normal activity. As a result, the atrial
158
ATRIOVENTRICULAR BLOCKS

Identifying type I second-degree AV block

This rhythm strip illustrates type I second-degree atroventricular (AV) block. Look for these distinguishing characteristics.

| Rhythm: Atrial—regular; ventricular—irregular |
| Rate: Atrial—80 beats/minute; ventricular—50 beats/minute |
| P wave: Normal |
| PR interval: Progressively prolonged |
| QRS complex: 0.08 second |
| T wave: Inverted |
| QT interval: 0.46 second |
| Other: Wenckebach pattern of grouped beats; PR interval appearing progressively longer until QRS complex drops |

The PR interval gets progressively longer...

...until a QRS complex is dropped.

The rhythm is normal. (See Identifying type I second-degree AV block.)

The PR interval gets gradually longer with each successive beat until finally a P wave fails to conduct to the ventricles. This makes the ventricular rhythm irregular, with a repeating pattern of groups of QRS complexes followed by a dropped beat in which the P wave isn’t followed by a QRS complex.

Famous footprints

That pattern of grouped beating is sometimes referred to as the footprints of Wenckebach. (Karel Frederik Wenckebach was a Dutch internist who, at the turn of the century and long before the introduction of the ECG, described the two forms of what’s now known as second-degree AV block by analyzing waves in the jugular venous pulse. Following the introduction of the ECG, German cardiologist Woldemar Mobitz clarified Wenckebach’s findings as type I and type II.)

As you’ve probably noticed by now, rhythm strips have distinctive patterns. (See Rhythm strip patterns.)
Lonely Ps, light-headed patients

Usually asymptomatic, a patient with type I second-degree AV block may show signs and symptoms of decreased cardiac output, such as light-headedness or hypotension. Symptoms may be especially pronounced if the ventricular rate is slow.

How you intervene

No treatment is needed if the patient is asymptomatic. For a symptomatic patient, atropine may improve AV node conduction. A temporary pacemaker may be required for long-term relief of symptoms until the rhythm resolves.

When caring for a patient with this block, assess his tolerance for the rhythm and the need for treatment to improve cardiac output. Evaluate the patient for possible causes of the block, including the use of certain medications or the presence of ischemia.

Check the ECG frequently to see if a more severe type of AV block develops. Make sure the patient has a patent I.V. line. Teach him about his temporary pacemaker, if indicated.
Type II second-degree AV block

Type II second-degree AV block, also known as Mobitz type II block, is less common than type I but more serious. It occurs when occasional impulses from the SA node fail to conduct to the ventricles.

On an ECG, you won’t see the PR interval lengthen before the impulse fails to conduct, as you do with type I second-degree AV block. You’ll see, instead, consistent AV node conduction and an occasional dropped beat. This block is like a line of people passing through a doorway at the same speed, except that, periodically, one of them just can’t get through.

How it happens

Type II second-degree AV block is usually caused by an anterior wall MI, degenerative changes in the conduction system, or severe coronary artery disease. The arrhythmia indicates a problem at the level of the bundle of His or bundle branches.

Type II block is more serious than type I because the ventricular rate tends to be slower and the cardiac output diminished. It’s also more likely to cause symptoms, particularly if the sinus rhythm is slow and the ratio of conducted beats to dropped beats is low such as 2:1. (See 2:1 AV block.) Usually chronic, type II second-degree AV block may progress to a more serious form of block. (See High-grade AV block.)

2:1 AV block

In 2:1 second-degree atrioventricular (AV) block, every other QRS complex is dropped, so there are always two P waves for every QRS complex. The resulting ventricular rhythm is regular.

Keep in mind that type II block is more likely to impair cardiac output, lead to symptoms such as syncope, and progress to a more severe form of block. Be sure to monitor the patient carefully.
What to look for

When monitoring a rhythm strip, look for an atrial rhythm that’s regular and a ventricular rhythm that may be regular or irregular, depending on the block. (See Identifying type II second-degree AV block, page 162.) If the block is intermittent, the rhythm is irregular. If the block is constant, such as 2:1 or 3:1, the rhythm is regular.

Overall, the strip will look as if someone erased some QRS complexes. The PR interval will be constant for all conducted beats but may be prolonged. The QRS complex is usually wide, but normal complexes may occur.
Jumpin’ palpitations!

Most patients who experience a few dropped beats remain asymptomatic as long as cardiac output is maintained. As the number of dropped beats increases, patients may experience palpitations, fatigue, dyspnea, chest pain, or light-headedness. On physical examination, you may note hypotension, and the pulse may be slow and regular or irregular.

How you intervene

If the dropped beats are infrequent and the patient shows no symptoms of decreased cardiac output, the practitioner may choose only to observe the rhythm, particularly if the cause is thought to be reversible. If the patient is hypotensive, treatment aims to improve cardiac output by increasing the heart rate. Atropine, dopamine, or epinephrine may be given for symptomatic bradycardia. Discontinue digoxin, if it’s the cause of the arrhythmia.
Because the conduction block occurs in the His-Purkinje system, transcutaneous pacing should be initiated quickly.

**Pacemaker place**

Type II second-degree AV block commonly requires placement of a pacemaker. A temporary pacemaker may be used until a permanent pacemaker can be placed.

When caring for a patient with type II second-degree block, assess his tolerance for the rhythm and the need for treatment to improve cardiac output. Evaluate for possible correctable causes such as ischemia.

Keep the patient on bed rest, if indicated, to reduce myocardial oxygen demands. Administer oxygen therapy as ordered. Observe the patient for progression to a more severe form of AV block. If the patient receives a pacemaker, teach him and his family about its use.

### Third-degree AV block

Also called *complete heart block*, third-degree AV block occurs when impulses from the atria are completely blocked at the AV node and can’t be conducted to the ventricles. Maintaining our doorway analogy, this form of block is like a line of people waiting to go through a doorway, but no one can go through.

**Beats of different drummers**

Acting independently, the atria, generally under the control of the SA node, tend to maintain a regular rate of 60 to 100 beats/minute. The ventricular rhythm can originate from the AV node and maintain a rate of 40 to 60 beats/minute. Most typically, it originates from the Purkinje system in the ventricles and maintains a rate of 20 to 40 beats/minute.

The rhythm strip will look like a strip of P waves laid independently over a strip of QRS complexes. Note that the P wave doesn’t conduct the QRS complex that follows it.

**How it happens**

Third-degree AV block that originates at the level of the AV node is most commonly a congenital condition. This block may also be caused by coronary artery disease, an anterior or inferior wall MI, degenerative changes in the heart, digoxin toxicity, calcium channel blockers, beta-adrenergic blockers, or surgical injury. It may
be temporary or permanent. (See *Heart block after congenital heart repair*.)

Because the ventricular rate is so slow, third-degree AV block presents a potentially life-threatening situation because cardiac output can drop dramatically. In addition, the patient loses his atrial kick—that extra 30% of blood flow pushed into the ventricles by atrial contraction. That happens as a result of the loss of synchrony between the atrial and ventricular contractions. The loss of atrial kick further decreases cardiac output. Any exertion on the part of the patient can worsen symptoms.

**What to look for**

When analyzing an ECG for this rhythm, you'll note that the atrial and ventricular rhythms are regular. The P and R waves can be “walked out” across the strip, meaning that they appear to march across the strip in rhythm. (See *Identifying third-degree AV block*.)

Some P waves may be buried in QRS complexes or T waves. The PR interval will vary with no pattern or regularity. If the resulting rhythm, called the *escape rhythm*, originates in the AV node, the QRS complex will be normal and the ventricular rate will be 40 to 60 beats/minute. If the escape rhythm originates in the Purkinje system, the QRS complex will be wide, with a ventricular rate below 40 beats/minute.

**Escape!**

The PR interval varies because the atria and ventricles beat independently of each other. The QRS complex is determined by the site of the escape rhythm. Usually, the duration and configuration are normal; however, with an idioventricular escape rhythm (an escape rhythm originating in the ventricles), the duration is greater than 0.12 second and the complex is distorted.

While atrial and ventricular rates can vary with third-degree block, they're nearly the same with complete AV dissociation, a similar rhythm. (See *Complete AV dissociation*, page 166.)

**Serious signs and symptoms**

Most patients with third-degree AV block experience significant symptoms, including severe fatigue, dyspnea, chest pain, light-headedness, changes in mental status, and loss of consciousness. You may note hypotension, pallor, diaphoresis, bradycardia, and a variation in the intensity of the pulse.

*In third-degree AV block, the patient loses his atrial kick, which presents a potentially life-threatening situation.*

*Heart block after congenital heart repair* 

After repair of a ventricular septal defect, a child may require a permanent pacemaker if complete heart block develops. This arrhythmia may develop from interference with the bundle of His during surgery.
A few patients will be relatively free from symptoms, complaining only that they can’t tolerate exercise and that they’re often tired for no apparent reason. The severity of symptoms depends to a great extent on the resulting ventricular rate.

**How you intervene**

If cardiac output isn’t adequate or the patient’s condition seems to be deteriorating, therapy aims to improve the ventricular rate. Atropine may be given, or a temporary pacemaker may be used to restore adequate cardiac output. Dopamine and epinephrine may also be indicated.

Temporary pacing may be required until the cause of the block resolves or until a permanent pacemaker can be inserted. A permanent block requires placement of a permanent pacemaker.
ATRIOVENTRICULAR BLOCKS

Bundles of troubles

The patient with an anterior wall MI is more likely to have permanent third-degree AV block if the MI involved the bundle of His or the bundle branches than if it involved other areas of the myocardium. Those patients commonly require prompt placement of a permanent pacemaker.

Don’t skip this strip

Complete AV dissociation

With both third-degree atrioventricular (AV) block and complete AV dissociation, the atria and ventricles beat independently, each controlled by its own pacemaker. However, here’s the key difference: In third-degree AV block, the atrial rate is faster than the ventricular rate. With complete AV dissociation, the two rates are usually about the same, with the ventricular rate slightly faster.

Rhythm disturbances

Never the primary problem, complete AV dissociation results from one of three underlying rhythm disturbances:

- slowed or impaired sinus impulse formation or sinoatrial conduction, as in sinus bradycardia or sinus arrest
- accelerated impulse formation in the AV junction or the ventricle, as in accelerated junctional or ventricular tachycardia
- AV conduction disturbance, as in complete AV block.

When to treat

The clinical significance of complete AV dissociation—as well as treatment for the arrhythmia—depends on the underlying cause and its effect on the patient. If the underlying rhythm decreases cardiac output, the patient will need treatment to correct the arrhythmia.

Depending on the underlying cause, the patient may be treated with an antiarrhythmic, such as atropine and isoproterenol, to restore synchrony. Alternatively, the patient may be given a pacemaker to support a slow ventricular rate. If drug toxicity caused the original disturbance, the drug should be discontinued.

The QRS complex is usually normal but may be wide and bizarre.

The atrial and ventricular rates are nearly equal, and the rhythms are regular.

The P wave isn’t related to the QRS complex.
An AV block in a patient with an inferior wall MI is more likely to be temporary, as a result of injury to the AV node. Placement of a permanent pacemaker is usually delayed in such cases to evaluate recovery of the conduction system.

Check it out...

When caring for a patient with third-degree heart block, immediately assess the patient’s tolerance of the rhythm and the need for treatment to support cardiac output and relieve symptoms. Make sure the patient has a patent I.V. catheter. Administer oxygen therapy as ordered. Evaluate for possible correctable causes of the arrhythmia, such as medications or ischemia. Minimize the patient’s activity and maintain his bed rest.

That’s a wrap!

Atrioventricular blocks review

AV blocks
- Result from an interruption in impulse conduction between the atria and ventricles
- Possibly occurring at the level of the AV node, the bundle of His, or the bundle branches
- Atrial rate commonly normal (60 to 100 beats/minute) with slowed ventricular rate
- Classified according to severity, not location

First-degree AV block
- Occurs when impulses from the atria are consistently delayed during conduction through the AV node
- Can progress to a more severe block

Characteristics
- ECG shows normal sinus rhythm except for prolonged PR interval
- Rhythms: Regular
- P wave: Normal
- PR interval: Consistent for each beat; greater than 0.20 second
- QRS complex: Normal; occasionally widened due to bundle-branch block
- QT interval: Normal

Treatment
- Correction of the underlying cause

Type I second-degree AV block
- Also called Mobitz type I block

Characteristics
- Rhythms: Atrial—regular; ventricular—irregular
- Rates: Atrial rate exceeds ventricular rate
- P wave: Normal
- PR interval: Gradually gets longer with each beat until P wave fails to conduct to the ventricles
- QRS complex: Usually normal
- T wave: Normal

Treatment
- No treatment if asymptomatic
- Atropine to improve AV conduction
- Temporary pacemaker insertion

Type II second-degree AV block
- Also known as Mobitz II block
- Occasional impulses from the SA node fail to conduct to the ventricles

(continued)
Atroventricular blocks review (continued)

- **Characteristics**
  - **Rhythms:** Atrial—regular; ventricular—irregular if block is intermittent, regular if block is constant (such as 2:1 or 3:1)
  - **PR interval:** Constant for all conducted beats, may be prolonged in some cases
  - **QRS complex:** Usually wide
  - **T wave:** Normal
  - **Other:** PR and RR intervals constant before a dropped beat with no warning

**Treatment**
- Temporary or permanent pacemaker insertion
- Atropine, dopamine, or epinephrine for symptomatic bradycardia
- Discontinuation of digoxin if appropriate

**Third-degree AV block**
- Also known as complete heart block
- Impulses from the atria completely blocked at the AV node and not conducted to the ventricles

- **Characteristics**
  - **Rhythms:** Atrial—regular; ventricular—regular
  - **Rates:** Atrial rate exceeds ventricular rate
  - **P wave:** Normal
  - **PR interval:** Variations with no regularity; no relation between P waves and QRS complexes
  - **QRS complex:** Normal (junctional pacemaker) or wide and bizarre (ventricular pacemaker)
  - **T wave:** Normal
  - **Other:** P waves without QRS complex

**Treatment**
- Correction of the underlying cause
- Temporary or permanent pacemaker
- Atropine, dopamine, or epinephrine for symptomatic bradycardia

**Complete AV dissociation**
- Atria and ventricles beat independently, each controlled by its own pacemaker

- **Characteristics**
  - **Rates:** Atrial and ventricular rates are nearly equal with ventricular rate slightly faster
  - **Rhythms:** Regular
  - **P wave:** No relation to QRS
  - **QRS complex:** Usually normal; may be wide and bizarre

**Treatment**
- Correction of the underlying cause
- Atropine or isoproterenol to restore synchrony
- Pacemaker insertion

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**Quick quiz**

1. No treatment is necessary if the patient has the form of AV block known as:
   A. first-degree AV block.
   B. type II second-degree AV block.
   C. third-degree AV block.
   D. complete AV dissociation.
**QUICK QUIZ**

*Answer:* A. A patient with first-degree AV block rarely experiences symptoms and usually requires only monitoring for progression of the block.

2. In type I second-degree AV block, the PR interval:
   A. varies according to the ventricular response rate.
   B. progressively lengthens until a QRS complex is dropped.
   C. remains constant despite an irregular ventricular rhythm.
   D. is unmeasurable.

*Answer:* B. Progressive lengthening of the PR interval creates an irregular ventricular rhythm with a repeating pattern of groups of QRS complexes. Those groups are followed by a dropped beat in which the P wave isn’t followed by a QRS complex.

3. Myocardial ischemia may cause cells in the AV node to repolarize:
   A. normally.
   B. more quickly than normal.
   C. more slowly than normal.
   D. in a retrograde fashion.

*Answer:* C. Injured cells conduct impulses slowly or inconsistently. Relief of the ischemia can restore normal function to the AV node.

4. Type II second-degree AV block is generally considered more serious than type I because in most cases of type II the:
   A. cardiac output is diminished.
   B. ventricular rate rises above 100 beats/minute.
   C. peripheral vascular system shuts down almost as soon as the arrhythmia begins.
   D. atrial rate rises above 100 beats/minute.

*Answer:* A. This form of AV block causes a decrease in cardiac output, particularly if the sinus rhythm is slow and the ratio of conducted beats to dropped beats is low such as 2:1.

5. AV block can be caused by inadvertent damage to the heart’s conduction system during cardiac surgery. Damage is most likely to occur in surgery involving which area of the heart?
   A. Pulmonic or tricuspid valve
   B. Mitral or pulmonic valve
   C. Aortic or mitral valve
   D. Mitral or tricuspid valve

*Answer:* D. AV block can be caused by surgery involving the mitral or tricuspid valve or in the closure of a ventricular septal defect.
6. A main component of the treatment for third-degree AV block is:
   A. use of a pacemaker.
   B. administration of calcium channel blockers.
   C. administration of oxygen and antiarrhythmics.
   D. administration of beta-adrenergic blockers.
   Answer: A. Temporary pacing may be required for this rhythm disturbance until the cause of the block resolves or until a permanent pacemaker can be implanted. Permanent third-degree AV block requires placement of a permanent pacemaker.

7. Treatment of first-degree AV block is aimed at correcting the underlying cause. Which of the following may cause first-degree AV block?
   A. Stress
   B. Digoxin
   C. Angiotensin-converting enzyme inhibitors
   D. Physical exertion
   Answer: B. First-degree AV block may be caused by MI or ischemia, myocarditis, degenerative changes in the heart, and such medications as digoxin, calcium channel blockers, and beta-adrenergic blockers.

Test strips
Okay, try these test strips. Using the 8-step method for interpretation, fill in the blanks below with the particular characteristics of the strip. Then check your answers with ours.

Strip 1

Atrial rhythm: ________________________________
Ventricular rhythm: ________________________________
Atrial rate: ________________________________
Ventricular rate: ________________________________
P wave: ________________________________
PR interval: ________________________________
QRS complex: ________________________________
T wave: ________________________________
QUICK QUIZ

QT interval: ____________________________
Other: ____________________________
**Interpretation:** ____________________________

**Strip 2**

Atrial rhythm: ____________________________
Ventricular rhythm: ____________________________
Atrial rate: ____________________________
Ventricular rate: ____________________________
P wave: ____________________________
PR interval: ____________________________
QRS complex: ____________________________
T wave: ____________________________
QT interval: ____________________________
Other: ____________________________
**Interpretation:** ____________________________

**Strip 3**

Atrial rhythm: ____________________________
Ventricular rhythm: ____________________________
Atrial rate: ____________________________
Ventricular rate: ____________________________
P wave: ____________________________
PR interval: ____________________________
QRS complex: ____________________________
T wave: ____________________________
QT interval: ____________________________
Other: ____________________________
**Interpretation:** ____________________________
Answers to test strips

1. Rhythm: Regular atrial and ventricular rhythms
   Rate: 75 beats/minute
   P wave: Normal size and configuration
   PR interval: 0.34 second
   QRS complex: 0.08 second
   T wave: Normal configuration
   QT interval: 0.42 second
   Other: None
   Interpretation: Normal sinus rhythm with first-degree AV block

2. Rhythm: Regular atrial and ventricular rhythms
   Rate: Atrial rates are 100 beats/minute; ventricular rates are 50 beats/minute
   P wave: Normal size and configuration
   PR interval: 0.14 second
   QRS complex: 0.06 second
   T wave: Normal configuration
   QT interval: 0.44 second
   Other: Two P waves for each QRS
   Interpretation: Type II second-degree AV block

3. Rhythm: Regular atrial and ventricular rhythms
   Rate: Atrial rates are 75 beats/minute; ventricular rates are 36 beats/minute
   P wave: Normal size; no constant relationship to QRS complex
   PR interval: N/A
   QRS complex: 0.16 second; wide and bizarre
   T wave: Normal except for second beat distorted by a P wave
   QT interval: 0.42 second
   Interpretation: Third-degree AV block

Scoring

⭐⭐⭐ If you correctly answered all seven questions and filled in all the blanks, way to go! We’re willing to bet 2:1 that you’re aces when it comes to AV block.

⭐⭐ If you answered six questions correctly and correctly filled in most of the blanks, good job! No real intervention is necessary; we’ll just continue to monitor your progress.

⭐ If you answered fewer than six questions correctly and missed most of the blanks, give it another go. We certainly won’t block your impulse to reread the chapter.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part III</th>
<th>Treating arrhythmias</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Nonpharmacologic treatments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Pharmacologic treatments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>175</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Nonpharmacologic treatments

Just the facts

In this chapter, you’ll learn:

♦ nonpharmacologic treatments of arrhythmias and how they work
♦ ways to identify and treat complications of nonpharmacologic treatments
♦ nursing care for patients receiving nonpharmacologic treatments
♦ patient teaching points for nonpharmacologic treatments.

A look at pacemakers

A pacemaker is an artificial device that electrically stimulates the myocardium to depolarize, which begins a contraction.

Pacemakers may be used when a patient has an arrhythmia, such as certain bradyarrhythmias and tachyarrhythmias, sick sinus syndrome, or atrioventricular (AV) blocks. The device may be temporary or permanent, depending on the patient’s condition. Pacemakers are commonly necessary following myocardial infarction or cardiac surgery.

And the beat goes on…

Pacemakers work by generating an impulse from a power source and transmitting that impulse to the heart muscle. The impulse flows throughout the heart and causes the heart muscle to depolarize. Pacemakers consist of three components: the pulse generator, the pacing leads, and the electrode tip.
Making the pacer work

The pulse generator contains the pacemaker’s power source and circuitry. The lithium batteries in a permanent or implanted pacemaker are its power source and last about 10 years. The circuitry of the pacemaker is a microchip that guides heart pacing.

A temporary pacemaker, which isn’t implanted, is about the size of a small radio or a telemetry box and is powered by alkaline batteries. These units also contain a microchip and are programmed by a touch pad or dials.

A stimulus on the move

An electrical stimulus from the pulse generator moves through wires or pacing leads to the electrode tips. The leads for a pacemaker designed to stimulate a single heart chamber are placed in

A look at pacing leads

Pacing leads have either one electrode (unipolar) or two (bipolar). These illustrations show the difference between the two leads.

Unipolar lead
In a unipolar system, electric current moves from the pulse generator through the leadwire to the negative pole. From there, it stimulates the heart and returns to the pulse generator’s metal surface (the positive pole) to complete the circuit.

Bipolar lead
In a bipolar system, current flows from the pulse generator through the leadwire to the negative pole at the tip. At that point, it stimulates the heart and then the positive pole within the lead to complete the circuit.
either the atrium or the ventricle. For dual-chamber, or AV, pacing, the leads are placed in both chambers, usually on the right side of the heart.

**One lead or two**

The electrodes—one on a unipolar lead or two on a bipolar lead—send information about electrical impulses in the myocardium back to the pulse generator. The pulse generator senses the heart’s electrical activity and responds according to how it has been programmed.

A unipolar lead system is more sensitive to the heart’s intrinsic electrical activity than is a bipolar system. A bipolar system isn’t as easily affected by electrical activity outside the heart and the generator (for example, from skeletal muscle contraction or magnetic fields). (See A look at pacing leads.)

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### Working with pacemakers

On an ECG, you’ll notice a pacemaker spike right away. (See Pacemaker spikes.) It occurs when the pacemaker sends an electrical impulse to the heart muscle. That impulse appears as a vertical line or spike.

Depending on the position of the electrode, the spike appears in different locations on the waveform.

- When the atria are stimulated by the pacemaker, the spike is followed by a P wave and the patient’s baseline QRS complex and T wave. This series of waveforms represents successful pacing, or capture, of the myocardium. The P wave may look different from the patient’s normal P wave.
- When the ventricles are stimulated by a pacemaker, the spike is followed by a QRS complex and a T wave. The QRS complex appears wider than the patient’s own QRS complex because of the way the ventricles are depolarized.
- When the pacemaker stimulates both the atria and the ventricles, the first spike is followed by a P wave, then a spike, and then a QRS complex. Be aware that the type of pacemaker used and the patient’s condition may affect whether every beat is paced.

### Permanent and temporary pacemakers

Depending on the patient’s signs and symptoms, a permanent or a temporary pacemaker can be used to maintain heart rhythm. Lead placement varies according to the patient’s specific needs.
**Permanent pacemakers**

A permanent pacemaker is used to treat chronic heart conditions such as AV block. It’s surgically implanted, usually under local anesthesia. The leads are placed transvenously, positioned in the appropriate chambers, and then anchored to the endocardium. (See Placing a permanent pacemaker.)

**Pocket generator**

The generator is then implanted in a pocket made from subcutaneous tissue. The pocket is usually constructed under the clavicle. Permanent pacemakers are programmed during implantation. The programming sets the conditions under which the pacemaker functions and can be adjusted externally if necessary.

**Temporary pacemakers**

A temporary pacemaker is commonly inserted in an emergency. The patient may show signs of decreased cardiac output, such as hypotension or syncope. The temporary pacemaker supports the patient until the condition resolves.

A temporary pacemaker can also serve as a bridge until a permanent pacemaker is inserted. Temporary pacemakers are used for patients with heart block, bradycardia, or low cardiac output. Several types of temporary pacemakers are available, including transvenous, epicardial, and transcutaneous.

**Going the transvenous way**

Doctors may use the transvenous approach—inserting the pacemaker through a vein, such as the subclavian or internal jugular vein—when inserting a temporary pacemaker at the bedside or in other nonsurgical environments. The transvenous pacemaker is probably the most common and reliable type of temporary pacemaker. It’s usually inserted at the bedside or in a fluoroscopy suite. The leadwires are advanced through a catheter into the right ventricle or atrium and then connected to the pulse generator.

**Taking the epicardial route**

Epicardial pacemakers are commonly used for patients undergoing cardiac surgery. The doctor attaches the tips of the leadwires to the surface of the heart and then brings the wires through the chest wall, below the incision. They’re then attached to the pulse generator. The leadwires are usually removed several days after surgery or when the patient no longer requires them.
Placing a permanent pacemaker

The doctor who implants the endocardial pacemaker usually selects a transvenous route and begins lead placement by inserting a catheter percutaneously or by venous cutdown. Then, with a stylet and fluoroscopic guidance, the doctor threads the catheter through the vein until the tip reaches the endocardium.

**Lead placement**

For lead placement in the atrium, the tip must lodge in the right atrium or coronary sinus, as shown here. For placement in the ventricle, it must lodge within the right ventricular apex in one of the interior muscular ridges, or *trabeculae*.

**Implanting the generator**

When the lead is in the proper position, the doctor secures the pulse generator in a subcutaneous pocket of tissue just below the clavicle. Changing the generator’s battery or microchip circuitry requires only a shallow incision over the site and a quick component exchange.

Following the transcutaneous path

Use of an external or transcutaneous pacemaker has become commonplace in the past several years. In this noninvasive method, one electrode is placed on the patient’s anterior chest wall, and a second is applied to his back. An external pulse generator then emits pacing impulses that travel through the skin to the heart muscle. Transcutaneous pacing is also built into many defibrillators for use in an emergency. In this case, the electrodes are built into the same electrode patches used for defibrillation.

Transcutaneous pacing is a quick and effective method of pacing heart rhythm and is commonly used in an emergency until a transvenous pacemaker can be inserted. However, some alert
patients can’t tolerate the irritating sensations produced from prolonged pacing at the levels needed to pace the heart externally.

**Setting the controls**

When your patient has a temporary pacemaker, you’ll notice several types of settings on the pulse generator. The rate control regulates how many impulses are generated in 1 minute and is measured in pulses per minute (ppm). The rate is usually set at 60 to 80 ppm. (See *A look at a pulse generator.*) The pacemaker
fires if the patient’s heart rate falls below the preset rate. The rate may be set higher if the patient has a tachyarrhythmia that’s being treated with overdrive pacing.

**Measuring the output**

The electrical output of a pacemaker is measured in milliamperes. First, an assessment is made of the stimulation threshold, or how much energy is required to stimulate the cardiac muscle to depolarize. The stimulation threshold is sometimes referred to as the energy required for capture. The pacemaker’s output is then set higher than the stimulating threshold to ensure capture.

**Sensing the norm**

You can also program the pacemaker’s sensing threshold, measured in millivolts. Most pacemakers let the heart function naturally and assist only when necessary. The sensing threshold allows the pacemaker to do this by sensing the heart’s normal activity.

**Demand pacemakers**

A demand pacemaker responds to the heart’s activity by monitoring the intrinsic rhythm and pacing only when the heart can’t do so itself. (See *Pacemakers in elderly patients.*)

**Pacemaker codes**

The capabilities of permanent pacemakers may be described by a generic five-letter coding system, although three letters are more commonly used. (See *Pacemaker coding system*, page 182.)

**Introducing letter 1**

The first letter of the code identifies the heart chambers being paced. These are the options and the letters used to signify those options:

- V = Ventricle
- A = Atrium
- D = Dual (ventricle and atrium)
- O = None.

---

**Pacemakers in elderly patients**

Older adults with active lifestyles who require a pacemaker may respond best to atrioventricular synchronous pacemakers. That’s because older adults have a greater reliance on atrial contraction, or atrial kick, to complete ventricular filling.
Pacemaker coding system

A coding system for pacemaker functions can provide a simple description of pacemaker capabilities. One commonly used coding system employs three letters to describe functions.

The first letter refers to the chamber paced by the pacemaker. The second refers to the chamber sensed by the pacemaker. The third refers to the pacemaker’s response to the sensed event.

In the example shown here, both chambers (represented in the code by D, for dual) are paced and sensed. If no intrinsic activity is sensed, the pacemaker responds by firing impulses to both chambers.

Learning about letter 2

The second letter of the code signifies the heart chamber in which the pacemaker senses the intrinsic activity:
- \( V = \) Ventricle
- \( A = \) Atrium
- \( D = \) Dual (ventricle and atrium)
- \( O = \) None.

Looking at letter 3

The third letter shows the pacemaker’s response to the intrinsic electrical activity it senses in the atrium or ventricle:
- \( T = \) Triggers pacing (For instance, if atrial activity is sensed, ventricular pacing may be triggered.)
- \( I = \) Inhibits pacing (If the pacemaker senses intrinsic activity in a chamber, it won’t fire in that chamber.)
- \( D = \) Dual (The pacemaker can be triggered or inhibited depending on the mode and where intrinsic activity occurs.)
- \( O = \) None. (The pacemaker doesn’t change its mode in response to sensed activity.)
Figuring out letter 4

The fourth letter of the code describes rate modulation, also known as *rate responsiveness or rate adaptive pacing*:
- R = Rate modulation (A sensor adjusts the programmed paced heart rate in response to patient activity.)
- O = None. (Rate modulation is unavailable or disabled.)

Finally, letter 5

The final letter of the code is rarely used but specifies the location or absence of multisite pacing:
- O = None (No multisite pacing is present.)
- A = Atrium or atria (Multisite pacing in the atrium or atria is present.)
- V = Ventricle or ventricles (Multisite pacing in the ventricle or ventricles is present.)
- D = Dual site. (Dual site pacing in both the atrium and ventricles is present.)

Pacemaker modes

The mode of a pacemaker indicates its functions. Several different modes may be used during pacing, and they may not mimic the normal cardiac cycle. Here are three of the more commonly used modes and their three-letter abbreviations. (A three-letter code, rather than a five-letter code, is typically used to describe pacemaker function.) Pacemaker rates may vary by age. (See *Pediatric pacemakers*.)

AAI mode

The AAI, or atrial demand, pacemaker is a single-chambered pacemaker that paces and senses the right atrium. When the pacemaker senses intrinsic atrial activity, it inhibits pacing and resets itself. Only the atria are paced.

Not in block or brady

Because AAI pacemakers require a functioning AV node and ventricular conduction, they aren’t used in AV block or ventricular bradycardia. An AAI pacemaker may be used in patients with sinus bradycardia, which may occur after cardiac surgery, or with sick sinus syndrome as long as the His-Purkinje system isn’t diseased.
VVI mode
The VVI, or ventricular demand, pacemaker paces and senses the ventricles. (See AAI and VVI pacemakers.) When it senses intrinsic ventricular activity, it inhibits pacing. This single-chambered...

AAI and VVI pacemakers
AAI and VVI pacemakers are single-chamber pacemakers. Typically, the electrode for an AAI is placed in the right atrium; the right electrode for a VVI is placed in the right ventricle. These rhythm strips show how each pacemaker works.

AAI pacemaker
Note how the AAI pacemaker senses and paces the atria only. The QRS complex that follows occurs as a result of the heart’s own conduction.

VVI pacemaker
The VVI pacemaker senses and paces the ventricles. When each spike is followed by a depolarization, as shown here, the rhythm is said to reflect 100% pacing.
Pacemaker benefits patients with complete heart block and those needing intermittent pacing. Because it doesn’t affect atrial activity, it’s used for patients who don’t need an atrial kick—the extra 15% to 30% of cardiac output that comes from atrial contraction.

**Unsynchronized activity**

If the patient has spontaneous atrial activity, the VVI pacemaker won’t synchronize the ventricular activity with it, so tricuspid and mitral regurgitation may develop. Sedentary patients may receive this pacemaker, but it won’t adjust its rate for more active patients.

**DDD mode**

A DDD, or universal, pacemaker is used with severe AV block. (See DDD pacemaker rhythm strip.) However, because the pacemaker possesses so many capabilities, it may be hard to troubleshoot problems. Its advantages include its:

- versatility
- programmability

**DDD pacemaker rhythm strip**

On this DDD pacemaker rhythm strip, complexes 1, 2, 4, and 7 reveal the atrial-synchronous mode, set at a rate of 70. The patient has an intrinsic P wave; the pacemaker serves only to make sure the ventricles respond.

Complexes 3, 5, 8, 10, and 12 are intrinsic ventricular depolarizations. The pacemaker senses these depolarizations and inhibits firing. In complexes 6, 9, and 11, the pacemaker is pacing both the atria and the ventricles in sequence. In complex 13, only the atria are paced; the ventricles respond on their own.
• ability to change modes automatically
• ability to mimic the normal physiologic cardiac cycle, maintaining AV synchrony
• ability to sense and pace the atria and ventricles at the same time according to the intrinsic atrial rate and the maximal rate limit.

Home, home on the rate range
Unlike other pacemakers, the DDD pacemaker is set with a rate range, rather than a single critical rate. It senses atrial activity and ensures that the ventricles track or respond to each atrial stimulation, thereby maintaining normal AV synchrony.

Firing and pacing
The DDD pacemaker fires when the ventricle doesn’t respond on its own, and it paces the atria when the atrial rate falls below the lower set rate. (See Evaluating a DDD pacemaker rhythm strip.) In a patient with a high atrial rate, a safety mechanism allows the pacemaker to follow the intrinsic atrial rate only as far as a preset upper limit. That limit is usually set at about 130 beats/minute and helps to prevent the ventricles from tracking atrial fibrillation, atrial tachycardia, or atrial flutter.

Evaluating pacemakers
Now you’re ready to find out if your patient’s pacemaker is working correctly. To do this, follow the procedure described below.

1. Read the records
First, determine the pacemaker’s mode and settings. If your patient had a permanent pacemaker implanted before admission, ask him whether he has a wallet card from the manufacturer that notes the mode and settings.

If the pacemaker was recently implanted, check the patient’s records for information. Don’t check only the ECG tracing—you might misinterpret it if you don’t know the pacemaker type.

2. Look at the leads
Next, review the patient’s 12-lead ECG. If it isn’t available, examine lead V₁ or MCL₁ instead. If there is only one ventricular lead, it is usually in the right ventricle. Therefore, expect a negatively deflected paced QRS complex here, just as with a left bundle-branch block. An upright QRS complex may mean that the
leadwire is out of position, perhaps even perforating the septum and lodging in the left ventricle.

3. **Scrutinize the spikes**
   Then select a monitoring lead that clearly shows the pacemaker spikes. Make sure the lead you select doesn’t cause the cardiac monitor to mistake a spike for a QRS complex and then double-count the heart rate monitor. This may cause the alarm to go off, falsely signaling a high heart rate. If the monitor has a “paced mode,” select this mode to reduce errors.

4. **Mull over the mode**
   When looking at the ECG tracing of a patient with a pacemaker, consider the pacemaker mode. Then interpret the paced rhythm. Does it match what you know about the pacemaker?

5. **Unravel the rhythm**
   Look for information that tells you which chamber is paced. Is there capture? Is there a P wave or QRS complex after each atrial or ventricular spike? Or do the P waves and QRS complexes stem from intrinsic activity?
   Look for information about the pacemaker’s sensing ability. If intrinsic atrial or ventricular activity is present, what’s the pacemaker’s response? Look at the rate. What’s the pacing rate per minute? Is it appropriate given the pacemaker settings? Although you can determine the rate quickly by counting the number of complexes in a 6-second ECG strip, a more accurate method is to count the number of small boxes between complexes and divide this into 1,500.

**Troubleshooting problems**
Malfunction of a pacemaker can lead to arrhythmias, hypotension, and syncope. (See *When a pacemaker malfunctions*, page 188.)
Common problems with pacemakers that can lead to low cardiac output and loss of AV synchrony include:
- failure to capture
- failure to pace
- undersensing
- oversensing.

**Failure to capture**
Failure to capture is indicated on an ECG by a pacemaker spike without the appropriate atrial or ventricular response—a spike without a complex. Think of failure to capture as the pacemaker’s inability to stimulate the chamber.
Occasionally, pacemakers fail to function properly. When that happens, you need to take immediate action to correct the problem. The strips shown below are examples of problems that can occur with a temporary pacemaker and corrective actions to take in response.

**Mixed signals**

*When a pacemaker malfunctions*

**Failure to capture**
- If the patient’s condition has changed, notify the practitioner and ask for new settings. Be prepared to initiate cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) if needed.
- If pacemaker settings have been altered by the patient or someone else, return them to their correct positions. Make sure the face of the pacemaker is covered with its plastic shield. Remind the patient not to touch the dials.
- If the heart still doesn’t respond, carefully check all connections. You can also increase the milliampere setting slowly (according to your facility’s policy or the practitioner’s orders), turn the patient from side to side, or change the battery. Keep in mind that the practitioner may order a chest X-ray to determine the position of the electrode.

**Failure to pace**
- If the pacing or indicator light flashes, check the connections to the cable and the position of the pacing electrode in the patient (done by X-ray).
- If the pulse generator is turned on but the indicators aren’t flashing, change the battery. If that doesn’t help, use a different pulse generator.
- Decrease the sensitivity by increasing the millivolts. The pacemaker may be inhibiting pacing due to oversensing electrical activity from another heart chamber or muscle.
- Make sure atropine is available in case the patient’s heart rate drops, and be prepared to initiate CPR if needed.

**Failure to sense intrinsic beats**
- If the pacemaker is undersensing (it fires but at the wrong times or for the wrong reasons), turn the sensitivity control to a smaller number.
- Change the battery or pulse generator.
- Remove items in the room that might cause electromechanical interference. Check if the bed is grounded. Unplug each piece of equipment, and then check to see if the interference stops.
- If the pacemaker still fires on the T wave, turn off the pacemaker (per facility policy or practitioner’s order). Make sure atropine is available in case the patient’s heart rate drops, and be prepared to initiate CPR if needed.
Causes include hypoxia, acidosis, an electrolyte imbalance, fibrosis, an incorrect lead position, a low milliampere setting, depletion of the battery, a broken or cracked leadwire, or perforation of the leadwire through the myocardium.

**Failure to pace**

Failure to pace is indicated by no pacemaker activity on an ECG. The problem is caused by battery or circuit failure, cracked or broken leads, loose connections, oversensing, or the millivolts set too low. It can lead to asystole.

**Failure to sense**

Undersensing is indicated by a pacemaker spike when intrinsic cardiac activity is already present. Think of it as help being given when none is needed. When undersensing occurs in synchronous pacemakers, spikes occur on the ECG where they shouldn’t. Although they may appear in any part of the cardiac cycle, the spikes are especially dangerous if they fall on the T wave, where they can cause ventricular tachycardia or fibrillation.

In synchronous pacemakers, the problem is caused by millivoltage set too high, electrolyte imbalances, disconnection or dislodgment of a lead, improper lead placement, increased sensing threshold from edema or fibrosis at the electrode tip, drug interactions, or a depleted or dead pacemaker battery.

**Oversensing**

If the pacemaker is too sensitive, it can misinterpret muscle movement or events in a chamber other than the one that it should be sensing as depolarization. Then it won’t pace when the patient actually needs it, and heart rate and AV synchrony won’t be maintained.

**How you intervene**

Make sure you’re familiar with different types of pacemakers and how they function. This will save you time and worry during an emergency. When caring for a patient with a pacemaker, follow these guidelines.

**Checks and balances**

- Assist with pacemaker insertion as appropriate.
- Regularly check the patient’s pacemaker settings, connections, and functions.
Monitor the patient to see how well he tolerates the pacemaker. Reposition the patient with a temporary pacemaker carefully. Turning may dislodge the leadwire. Avoid potential microshocks to the patient by ensuring that electrical equipment is grounded properly, including the patient’s bed. Remember that pacemaker spikes on the monitor don’t mean your patient is stable. Be sure to check his vital signs and assess for signs and symptoms of decreased cardiac output, such as hypotension, chest pain, dyspnea, and syncope.

**On the alert**

- Be alert for signs of infection.
- Watch for subcutaneous air around the pacemaker insertion site. Subcutaneous tissue that contains air feels crunchy under your fingers.
- Look for pectoral muscle twitching or hiccups that occur in synchrony with the pacemaker. Both are signs of stimulation of a structure other than the heart, which may be serious. Notify the practitioner if you note either condition.
- Watch for a perforated ventricle and cardiac tamponade. Signs and symptoms include persistent hiccups, distant heart sounds, pulsus paradoxus (a drop in the strength of a pulse or a drop in systolic blood pressure greater than 10 mm Hg during inspiration), hypotension with narrowed pulse pressure, cyanosis, distended jugular veins, decreased urine output, restlessness, and complaints of fullness in the chest. Notify the practitioner immediately if you note any of these signs and symptoms.
- Watch for pneumothorax signs and symptoms, including shortness of breath, restlessness, and hypoxia. Mental status changes and arrhythmias may also occur. Auscultate for diminished breath sounds over the pneumothorax, usually at the apex of the lung on the side where the pacemaker was placed. Notify the practitioner if you suspect pneumothorax.

**What to teach the patient**

When a patient receives a pacemaker, be sure to cover these points:

- Explain to the patient and his family why a pacemaker is needed, how it works, and what they can expect.
- Warn the patient with a temporary pacemaker not to get out of bed without assistance.
- Warn the patient with a transcutaneous pacemaker to expect twitching of the pectoral muscles. Reassure him that he'll receive medication if he can’t tolerate the discomfort.
Instruct the patient not to manipulate the pacemaker wires or pulse generator.

- Give the patient with a permanent pacemaker the manufacturer’s identification card, and tell him to carry it at all times.
- Emphasize the importance of identifying pacemaker problems or battery depletion if your patient receives pacemaker checks over the telephone.
- Teach the patient and his family how to care for the incision, how to take a pulse, and what to do if the pulse drops below the pacemaker rate.
- Advise the patient to avoid tight clothing or other direct pressure over the pulse generator, to avoid magnetic resonance imaging scans and certain other diagnostic studies, and to notify the practitioner if he feels confused, light-headed, or short of breath.

The patient should also notify the practitioner if he has palpitations, hiccups, or a rapid or unusually slow heart rate.

A look at biventricular pacemakers

Biventricular pacing is used in the treatment of some patients with class III and IV heart failure, with both systolic heart failure and intraventricular conduction delay. Also called cardiac resynchronization therapy, biventricular pacing reduces symptoms and improves the quality of life in patients with advanced heart failure.

Two ventricles, three leads

Unlike other pacemakers, a biventricular pacemaker has three leads rather than two: one to pace the right atrium, one to pace the right ventricle, and one to pace the left ventricle. Both ventricles are paced at the same time, causing them to contract simultaneously, increasing cardiac output.

An important tip

Unlike traditional lead placement, the electrode tip for the left ventricle is placed in the coronary sinus to a branch of the cardiac vein. Because this electrode tip isn’t anchored in place, lead displacement may occur. (See Biventricular lead placement, page 192.)

Improves symptoms and quality of life

Biventricular pacing produces an improvement in the patient’s symptoms and activity tolerance. Moreover, biventricular pacing improves left ventricular remodeling and diastolic function and reduces sympathetic stimulation. As a result, in many patients,
the progression of heart failure is slowed and quality of life is improved.

**Different ventricles, different timing**

Under normal conditions, the right and left ventricles contract simultaneously to pump blood to the lungs and body, respectively. However, in heart failure, the damaged ventricles can’t pump as forcefully and the amount of blood ejected with each contraction is reduced. If the ventricular conduction pathways are also damaged, electrical impulses reach the ventricles at different times, producing asynchronous contractions. This condition, called *intraventricular conduction defect*, further reduces the amount of blood that the heart pumps, worsening the patient’s symptoms.
Sympathetic response

To compensate for reduced cardiac output, the sympathetic nervous system releases neurohormones, such as aldosterone, norepinephrine, and vasopressin, to boost the amount of blood ejected with each contraction. The resultant tachycardia and vasoconstriction increase the heart’s demand for oxygen, reduce diastolic filling time, promote sodium and water retention, and increase the pressure that the heart must pump against. The effect on the patient is a worsening of symptoms.

Who’s a candidate?

Not all patients with heart failure benefit from biventricular pacing. Candidates should have both systolic heart failure and intraventricular conduction delay along with these characteristics:
• symptomatic heart failure despite maximal medical therapy
• moderate to severe heart failure (New York Heart Association class III or IV)
• QRS complex greater than 0.13 second
• left ventricular ejection fraction of 35% or less.

Caring for the patient

Provide the same basic care for the patient with a biventricular pacemaker that you would for a patient with a standard permanent pacemaker. Specific care includes these guidelines:
• Before the procedure, ask the patient if he has an allergy to iodine or shellfish because contrast medium is used to visualize the coronary sinus and veins. Notify the practitioner if an allergy exists.
• Because of the position of the left ventricular lead, watch for stimulation of the diaphragm and left chest wall. Notify the practitioner if this occurs because the left ventricular lead may need repositioning or the pacing output may need to be reprogrammed.
• Observe the ECG for pacemaker spikes. Although both ventricles are paced, usually only one pacemaker spike is seen.
• Note the presence of positive R waves in leads $V_1$, $I$, and $aV_L$. Notify the practitioner if this isn’t the case or if the R wave direction changes at any time.
What to teach the patient

Provide the same basic teaching that you would for the patient receiving a permanent pacemaker. Additionally, when a patient gets a biventricular pacemaker, be sure to cover these points:

• Explain to the patient and his family why a biventricular pacemaker is needed, how it works, and what they can expect.
• Tell the patient and his family that it’s sometimes difficult to place the left ventricular lead and that the procedure can take 3 hours or more.
• Stress the importance of calling the practitioner immediately if the patient develops chest pain, shortness of breath, swelling of the hands or feet, or a weight gain of 3 lb (1.4 kg) in 24 hours or 5 lb (2.3 kg) in 72 hours.

A look at radiofrequency ablation

Radiofrequency ablation is an invasive procedure that may be used to treat arrhythmias in patients who haven’t responded to antiarrhythmic drugs or cardioversion or can’t tolerate antiarrhythmic drugs. In this procedure, bursts of radiofrequency energy are delivered through a catheter to the heart tissue to destroy the focus of the arrhythmia or block the conduction pathway.

Who’s a candidate?

Radiofrequency ablation is effective in treating patients with atrial tachycardia, atrial fibrillation and flutter, ventricular tachycardia, AV nodal reentry tachycardia, and Wolff-Parkinson-White (WPW) syndrome.

Understanding the procedure

The patient first undergoes an electrophysiology study to identify and map the specific areas of the heart that’s causing the arrhythmia. The ablation catheters are inserted into a vein, usually the femoral vein, and advanced to the heart where short bursts of radiofrequency waves destroy small targeted areas of heart tissue. The destroyed tissue can no longer conduct electrical impulses. Other types of energy may also be used, such as microwave, sonar, or cryo (freezing).
Hitting the target

In most patients with atrial fibrillation, the tissue inside the pulmonary vein is responsible for the arrhythmia. Targeted radiofrequency ablation is used to block these abnormal impulses. (See Destroying the source.)

Destroying the source

In radiofrequency ablation, special catheters are inserted in a vein and advanced to the heart. After the source of the arrhythmia is identified, radiofrequency energy is used to destroy the source of the abnormal electrical impulses or abnormal conduction pathway.

AV node ablation

If a rapid arrhythmia originates above the atrioventricular (AV) node, the AV node may be destroyed to block impulses from reaching the ventricles.

Pulmonary vein isolation and ablation

If ectopic foci in the pulmonary vein are the source of the atrial fibrillation, radiofrequency energy is used to destroy the tissue at the base of the pulmonary vein.
If a rapid arrhythmia that originates above the AV node (such as atrial fibrillation) isn’t terminated by targeted ablation, AV nodal ablation may be used to block electrical impulses from being conducted to the ventricles. After ablation of the AV node, the patient may need a pacemaker because impulses can no longer be conducted from the atria to the ventricles. If the atria continue to beat irregularly, anticoagulation therapy will also be needed to reduce the risk of stroke.

If the patient has WPW syndrome, electrophysiology studies can locate the accessory pathway and ablation can destroy it. When reentry is the cause of the arrhythmia, such as AV nodal reentry tachycardia, ablation can destroy the pathway without affecting the AV node.

How you intervene

When caring for a patient after radiofrequency ablation, follow these guidelines:
• Provide continuous cardiac monitoring, assessing for arrhythmias and ischemic changes.
• Place the patient on bed rest for 8 hours, or as ordered, and keep the affected extremity straight. Maintain the head of the bed between 15 and 30 degrees.
• Assess the patient’s vital signs every 15 minutes for the first hour, then every 30 minutes for 4 hours, unless the patient’s condition warrants more frequent checking.
• Assess peripheral pulses distal to the catheter insertion site as well as the color, sensation, temperature, and capillary refill of the affected extremity.
• Check the catheter insertion site for bleeding and hematoma formation.
• Monitor the patient for complications, such as hemorrhage, stroke, perforation of the heart, cardiac tamponade, arrhythmias, phrenic nerve damage, pericarditis, pulmonic vein stenosis or thrombosis, and sudden death.

What to teach the patient

When a patient undergoes radiofrequency ablation, be sure to cover these points:
• Discuss with the patient and his family why radiofrequency ablation is needed, how it works, and what they can expect.
• Warn the patient and his family that the procedure can be lengthy, up to 6 hours if electrophysiology studies are being done first.
Explain that the patient may be hospitalized for 24 to 48 hours to monitor his heart rhythm. Provide pacemaker teaching if the patient had a pacemaker inserted. (For more information about pacemaker teaching, see “What to teach the patient,” page 190.)

A look at ICDs

An implantable cardioverter-defibrillator (ICD) is an electronic device implanted in the body to provide continuous monitoring of the heart for bradycardia, ventricular tachycardia, and ventricular fibrillation. The device then administers either paced beats or shocks to treat the dangerous arrhythmia. In general, ICDs are indicated for patients for whom drug therapy, surgery, or catheter ablation has failed to prevent the arrhythmia.

The procedure for ICD insertion is similar to that of a permanent pacemaker and may be inserted in a cardiac catheterization or electrophysiology laboratory. Occasionally, a patient who requires other cardiac surgery, such as coronary artery bypass, may have the device implanted in the operating room.

What it is

An ICD consists of a programmable pulse generator and one or more leadwires. The pulse generator is a small battery-powered computer that monitors the heart’s electrical signals and delivers electrical therapy when it identifies an abnormal rhythm. The leads are insulated wires that carry the heart’s signal to the pulse generator and deliver the electrical energy from the pulse generator to the heart.

Storing and retrieving information

An ICD also stores information about the heart’s activity before, during, and after an arrhythmia, along with tracking which treatment was delivered and the outcome of that treatment. Devices also store electrograms (electrical tracings similar to ECGs). With an interrogation device, a practitioner or technician can retrieve this information to evaluate ICD function and battery status and to adjust ICD system settings.

Automatic response

Today’s advanced devices can detect a wide range of arrhythmias and automatically respond with the appropriate therapy, such as bradycardia pacing (both single- and dual-chamber), antitachycardia pacing, cardioversion, and defibrillation. ICDs that provide
**Nonpharmacologic Treatments**

Therapy for atrial arrhythmias, such as atrial fibrillation, are also available. (See Types of ICD therapies.)

**How it’s programmed**

When caring for a patient with an ICD, it’s important to know how the device is programmed. This information is available through a status report that can be obtained and printed when the practitioner or specially trained technician interrogates the device. This involves placing a specialized piece of equipment over the implanted pulse generator to retrieve pacing function. If the patient experiences an arrhythmia or the ICD delivers a therapy, the program information recorded helps to evaluate the functioning of the device.

Program information includes:
- type and model of the ICD
- status of the device (on or off)

### Types of ICD therapies

Implantable cardioverter-defibrillators (ICDs) can deliver a range of therapies depending on the arrhythmia detected and how the device is programmed. Therapies include antitachycardia pacing, cardioversion, defibrillation, and bradycardia pacing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Therapy</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Antitachycardia pacing</td>
<td>A short series of rapid, electrical pacing pulses are used to interrupt ventricular tachycardia (VT) and return the heart to its normal rhythm.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cardioversion</td>
<td>A low- or high-energy shock (up to 35 joules) is timed to the R wave to terminate VT and return the heart to its normal rhythm.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defibrillation</td>
<td>A high-energy shock (up to 35 joules) to the heart is used to terminate ventricular fibrillation and return the heart to its normal rhythm.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bradycardia pacing</td>
<td>Electrical pacing pulses are used when the heart’s natural electrical signals are too slow. ICD systems can pace one ventricle (VVI pacing) of the heart at a preset rate. Some systems will sense and pace both chambers (DDD pacing).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• detection rates
• therapies that will be delivered: bradycardia pacing, antitachycardia pacing, cardioversion, and defibrillation.

**Arresting developments**

Follow these guidelines if your patient experiences an arrhythmia:
• If the patient experiences cardiac arrest, initiate cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and advanced cardiac life support.
• If the ICD delivers a shock while you’re performing chest compressions, you may also feel a slight shock. Wear gloves to prevent shock.
• Externally defibrillating the patient is safe as long as the paddles aren’t placed directly over the pulse generator. The anteroposterior paddle position is preferred.

**Be alert**

• Watch for signs of a perforated ventricle, with resultant cardiac tamponade. Ominous signs include persistent hiccups, distant heart sounds, pulsus paradoxus, hypotension accompanied by narrow pulse pressure, increased venous pressure, distended jugular veins, cyanosis, decreased urine output, restlessness, and complaints of fullness in the chest. Report any of these signs immediately to the practitioner and prepare the patient for emergency surgery.
• Assess the area around the incision and report swelling, tenderness, drainage, redness, unusual warmth, or hematoma.

**What to teach the patient**

• Explain to the patient and his family why an ICD is needed, how it works, potential complications, and what they can expect. Make sure they also understand ICD terminology.
• Discuss signs and symptoms to report to the practitioner immediately.
• Advise the patient to wear a medical identification bracelet indicating ICD placement.
• Educate family members in emergency techniques (such as dialing 911 and performing CPR) in case the device fails.
• Explain that electrical or electronic devices may cause disruption of the device.
• Warn the patient to avoid placing excessive pressure over the insertion site or moving or jerking the area until the postoperative visit.
• Tell the patient to follow normal routines as allowed by the practitioner and to increase exercise as tolerated.
• Remind the patient to carry information regarding his ICD at all times and to inform airline clerks when he travels as well as individuals performing diagnostic functions (such as computed tomography scans and magnetic resonance imaging) about the device.
• Stress the importance of follow-up care and checkups.

**That’s a wrap!**

**Nonpharmacologic treatments review**

**Pacemaker**
- A device that electrically stimulates the myocardium to depolarize

**Atrial and ventricular stimulation**
- *Atria*: spike followed by a P wave and the patient’s baseline QRS complex and T wave
- *Ventricles*: spike followed by a QRS complex and T wave
- *Atria and ventricles*: first spike followed by a P wave, then a spike, and then a QRS complex

**Pacemaker codes**
- First letter identifies the heart chambers being paced.
- Second letter signifies the heart chamber sensed by the pacemaker.
- Third letter refers to the pacemaker’s response to the intrinsic electrical activity of the heart.
- Fourth letter refers to the pacemaker’s rate modulation.
- Fifth letter refers to the pacemaker’s location or absence of multisite pacing.

**Pacemaker modes**
- AAI = single-chambered pacemaker; paces and senses the atria
- VVI = paces and senses the ventricles
- DDD = fires when the ventricle doesn’t respond on its own; paces the atria when the atrial rate falls below the lower set rate; senses and paces both atria and ventricles

**Evaluating pacemakers**
- Determine the pacemaker’s mode and settings.
- Review the patient’s 12-lead ECG.
- Select a monitoring lead that clearly shows the pacemaker spikes.
- Interpret the paced rhythm.
- Look for information that tells which chamber is paced and about the pacemaker’s sensing ability.

**Troubleshooting pacemakers**
- Failure to capture: indicated by a spike without a complex
- Failure to pace: no pacemaker activity on the ECG
Nonpharmacologic treatments review (continued)

- Undersensing: spikes where they don’t belong
- Oversensing: won’t pace when the patient actually needs it

Biventricular pacemaker
- Pacemaker has three leads: one to pace the right atrium, one to pace the right ventricle, and one to pace the left ventricle.
- Both ventricles contract simultaneously, increasing cardiac output.

Candidates
For treatment of patients with:
- class III and IV heart failure, with both systolic failure and ventricular dysynchrony
- symptomatic heart failure despite maximal medical therapy
- QRS complex greater than 0.13 second
- left ventricular ejection fraction of 35% or less

Benefits of biventricular pacing
- Improves symptoms and activity tolerance
- Reverses left ventricular remodeling and diastolic function, and reduces sympathetic stimulation

Radiofrequency ablation
- Invasive procedure that uses radiofrequency energy to destroy heart tissue or conduction pathway responsible for arrhythmia
- Useful for atrial tachycardia, atrial fibrillation and flutter, ventricular tachycardia, AV nodal reentry tachycardia, and Wolff-Parkinson-White syndrome

Types of ablation
- Targeted ablation
- Pulmonary vein ablation
- AV nodal ablation (with pacemaker insertion)
- Accessory pathway ablation

Implantable cardioverter-defibrillator
- Implanted device that monitors for bradycardia, ventricular tachycardia, and ventricular fibrillation
- Provides shocks or paced beats to break arrhythmia

Types of therapy
- Antitachycardia pacing: bursts of pacing interrupt ventricular tachycardia
- Cardioversion: shock timed to the R wave to terminate ventricular tachycardia
- Defibrillation: shock to terminate ventricular fibrillation
- Bradycardia pacing: pacing when bradycardia is present

Programming information
- Type and model
- Status of the device (on or off)
- Therapies to be delivered: antitachycardia pacing (bradycardia pacing, cardioversion, defibrillation)
**Quick quiz**

1. When using a transcutaneous temporary pacemaker, the energy level should be set at:
   A. the highest milliampere setting the patient can tolerate.
   B. the lowest milliampere setting that ensures capture of the myocardium.
   C. a milliampere setting midway between the setting that causes capture of the myocardium and the setting at which symptoms first appear.
   D. the milliampere setting that provides a heart rate of 80 beats per minute.

   **Answer:** B. Select the lowest milliampere setting that causes capture of the myocardium. Higher energy levels will be too irritating for the patient.

2. Failure to capture is represented on the ECG as:
   A. no pacemaker activity.
   B. spikes where they shouldn’t be.
   C. a spike on a T wave.
   D. a spike without a complex.

   **Answer:** D. A spike without a complex indicates the pacemaker’s inability to capture or stimulate the chamber.

3. The first letter in the five-letter coding system for pacemakers identifies the:
   A. chamber in which the pacemaker senses intrinsic activity.
   B. heart chamber being paced.
   C. pacemaker’s response to the intrinsic electrical activity.
   D. pacemaker’s response to a tachyarrhythmia.

   **Answer:** B. The first letter identifies the heart chamber being paced, the second letter signifies the heart chamber that senses intrinsic activity, the third letter shows the pacemaker’s response to that activity, the fourth letter describes the rate modulation, and the fifth letter shows the location or absence of multisite pacing.

4. A patient with a biventricular pacemaker will have which lead configuration?
   A. A lead in both ventricles only
   B. A lead in each atria and each ventricle
   C. A lead in the right atrium and each ventricle
   D. A lead in both atria and the left ventricle
Answer: C. A biventricular pacemaker has three leads: one to pace the right atrium, one to pace the right ventricle, and one to pace the left ventricle.

5. After ablation of the AV node, the patient may need a pacemaker because:
   A. impulses can no longer be conducted from the atria to the ventricles.
   B. the sinoatrial node no longer initiates an electrical impulse.
   C. accessory pathways now conduct impulses from the atria to the ventricles.
   D. the AV node begins to fire at its intrinsic rate.

Answer: A. After AV nodal ablation, a pacemaker is needed because the electrical impulses from the atria are no longer conducted through the AV node to the ventricles.

6. Which therapy is the patient with an ICD receiving when the device delivers a series of small, rapid electrical pacing pulses?
   A. Bradycardia pacing
   B. Defibrillation
   C. Cardioversion
   D. Antitachycardia pacing

Answer: D. Antitachycardia pacing consists of a series of small, rapid electrical pacing pulses used to interrupt ventricular tachycardia and restore normal sinus rhythm.

Test strip

Time to try out a test strip. Ready? Go!

7. In the following ECG strip, the pacemaker is pacing and sensing the ventricles with 100% capture. The mode of response can’t be evaluated because of lack of intrinsic activity. You would determine that the patient has:
   A. a VVI pacemaker.
   B. a DDI pacemaker.
   C. an AAI pacemaker.
   D. an AOO pacemaker.

Answer: A. The patient has a VVI, or demand, pacemaker, which inhibits pacing when it senses ventricular activity.
Scoring

★★★★ If you answered all seven questions correctly, all right! You’ve taken the lead when it comes to nonpharmacologic treatment methods.
★★★ If you answered six questions correctly, terrific! Keep up the good pace.
★ If you answered fewer than six questions correctly, no sweat. Go with your impulse to reread the chapter and you’re sure to do better next time.
Pharmacologic treatments

Just the facts

In this chapter, you’ll learn:

♦ basic details about the antiarrhythmic drug classification system
♦ the effects antiarrhythmics have on the cardiovascular system and other body systems
♦ administration techniques and adverse effects of antiarrhythmic drugs
♦ nursing interventions for patients on antiarrhythmic drugs
♦ patient teaching related to antiarrhythmic administration.

A look at antiarrhythmics

Almost half a million Americans die each year from cardiac arrhythmias; countless others suffer symptoms or lifestyle limitations. Along with other treatments, antiarrhythmic drugs can help alleviate symptoms and prolong life.

Antiarrhythmic drugs affect the movement of ions across the cell membrane and alter the electrophysiology of the cardiac cell. They’re classified according to their effect on the cell’s electrical activity (action potential) and their mechanism of action. (See Antiarrhythmics and the action potential, page 206.)

Drugs in the same class are similar in action and adverse effects. When you know where a particular drug fits in the classification system, you’ll be better able to remember its actions and adverse effects.
Antiarrhythmics and the action potential

Each class of antiarrhythmic drugs acts on a different phase of the heart’s action potential. Here’s a rundown of the four classes of antiarrhythmics and how they affect action potential.

Class I blocks sodium

Class I drugs block the influx of sodium into the cell during phase 0 (rapid depolarization) of the action potential, which minimizes the chance of sodium reaching its threshold potential and causing cells to depolarize. Because phase 0 is also referred to as the sodium channel or fast channel, these drugs may also be called

Class II drugs inhibit adrenergic stimulation of cardiac tissue by depressing phase 4 spontaneous depolarization and slowing sinoatrial node impulses.

Class III drugs prolong phase 3, which increases repolarization and refractoriness.

Class IV drugs inhibit calcium’s slow influx during phase 2, which lengthens the phase. They also depress phase 4 and lengthen phases 1 and 2.

Classifying antiarrhythmics

The classification system divides antiarrhythmic drugs into four major classes. Let’s take a look at each one.

Class I blocks sodium

Class I drugs block the influx of sodium into the cell during phase 0 (rapid depolarization) of the action potential, which minimizes the chance of sodium reaching its threshold potential and causing cells to depolarize. Because phase 0 is also referred to as the sodium channel or fast channel, these drugs may also be called
sodium channel blockers or fast channel blockers. Drugs in this class are potentially proarrhythmic, meaning they can cause or worsen arrhythmias.

Antiarrhythmic drugs in this class are further categorized as:

- **class Ia**, which reduce conductivity and prolong repolarization and the action potential
- **class Ib**, which slow phase 0 depolarization, don’t affect conductivity, and shorten phase 3 repolarization and the action potential
- **class Ic**, which markedly slow phase 0 depolarization and reduce conduction (used only for refractory arrhythmias).

**Class II blocks beta receptors**

Class II drugs block sympathetic nervous system beta-adrenergic receptors and thereby decrease heart rate. Phase 4 depolarization is diminished resulting in depressed sinoatrial (SA) node automaticity and increased atrial and atrioventricular (AV) nodal refractoriness, or resistance to stimulation.

**Class III blocks potassium**

Class III drugs are called potassium channel blockers because they block the movement of potassium during phase 3 of the action potential and prolong repolarization and the refractory period.

**Class IV blocks calcium**

Class IV drugs block the movement of calcium during phase 2 of the action potential. Because phase 2 is also called the calcium channel or the slow channel, drugs that affect phase 2 are also known as calcium channel blockers or slow channel blockers. They prolong conductivity and increase the refractory period at the AV node.

**Some drugs don’t fit**

Not all drugs fit neatly into these classifications. For example, sotalol possesses characteristics of both class II and class III drugs. Some drugs used to treat arrhythmias don’t fit into the classification system at all, including adenosine (Adenocard), atropine, digoxin (Lanoxin), epinephrine, and magnesium sulfate. Despite these limitations, the classification system helps nurses understand how antiarrhythmic drugs prevent and treat arrhythmias.

**Drug distribution and clearance**

Many patients receive antiarrhythmic drugs by I.V. bolus or infusion because they’re more readily available that way than orally.
The cardiovascular system then distributes the drugs throughout the body, specifically to the site of action. Most drugs are changed, or biotransformed, into active or inactive metabolites in the liver. The kidneys are the primary sites for the excretion of those metabolites. When administering these drugs, remember that patients with impaired heart, liver, or kidney function may suffer from inadequate drug effect or toxicity. (See Drug metabolism and elimination across the life span.)

### Antiarrhythmics by class

Broken down by classes, the following section describes commonly used antiarrhythmic drugs. It highlights their dosages, adverse effects, and recommendations for patient care.

#### Class Ia antiarrhythmics

Class Ia antiarrhythmic drugs are called sodium channel blockers. They include quinidine and procainamide. These drugs reduce the excitability of the cardiac cell, have an anticholinergic effect, and decrease cardiac contractility. Because these drugs prolong the QT interval, the patient is prone to polymorphous ventricular tachycardia (VT). (See Effects of class Ia antiarrhythmics.)

#### Quinidine

Quinidine is used to treat patients with supraventricular and ventricular arrhythmias, such as atrial fibrillation or flutter, paroxysmal supraventricular tachycardia, and premature ventricular contractions (PVCs). The drug comes in several forms, including quinidine sulfate and quinidine gluconate.

**How to give it**

Here’s how to administer quinidine:

- To convert atrial flutter or fibrillation—Give 200 mg of quinidine sulfate orally every 2 to 3 hours for five to eight doses, with subsequent daily increases until sinus rhythm is restored or toxic effects develop.
- Initial dosage for paroxysmal supraventricular tachycardia—Give 400 to 600 mg of quinidine sulfate orally every 2 to 3 hours until sinus rhythm is restored or toxic effects develop.
- Initial dosage for premature atrial and ventricular contractions, paroxysmal AV junctional rhythm, paroxysmal atrial tachycardia, paroxysmal VT, or maintenance after cardioversion of atrial fibrillation or flutter—Give 200 mg of quinidine sulfate orally.
then 200 to 300 mg orally every 4 to 6 hours, or 300 to 600 mg of extended-release quinidine sulfate every 8 to 12 hours. For I.V. administration, give 800 mg of quinidine gluconate added to 40 ml of dextrose 5% in water (D5W), infused at 1 ml/minute.

What can happen

Adverse cardiovascular effects of quinidine include hypotension, cardiotoxicity, VT, ECG changes (widening of the QRS complex, widened QT and PR intervals), torsades de pointes, AV block, and heart failure. (See Noncardiac adverse effects of quinidine, page 210.)

How you intervene

Keep the following points in mind when caring for a patient taking quinidine:
- Monitor the patient’s ECG, heart rate, and blood pressure closely. Don’t give more than 4 g/day. Adjust dosages in patients with heart failure and liver disease.
- Obtain a baseline QT-interval measurement before the patient begins therapy. Watch for and notify the practitioner if the patient develops prolongation of the QT interval, a sign that the patient is predisposed to developing polymorphic VT. Also notify the practitioner if the QRS complex widens by 25% or more.
Remember that quinidine should be avoided in patients with second- or third-degree AV block who don’t have pacemakers. It should also be avoided in patients with profound hypotension, myasthenia gravis, intraventricular conduction defects, or hypersensitivity to the drug. Use it cautiously in elderly patients and in those with renal disease, hepatic disease, or asthma.

Avoid VT by administering digoxin before giving quinidine in patients with atrial tachyarrhythmias.

Closely monitor patients receiving quinidine and digoxin for signs and symptoms of digoxin toxicity, such as nausea, vision changes, or arrhythmias. Digoxin levels will be increased. Monitor serum drug levels. The therapeutic level for arrhythmia control is 2 to 5 mcg/ml.

Ask the patient about herb use. Concomitant use with jimsonweed may adversely affect cardiovascular function. Licorice combined with quinidine use may prolong the patient’s QT interval.

### Procainamide

Procainamide is indicated for supraventricular and ventricular arrhythmias. Because it comes in various forms, dosages differ.

#### How to give it

Here’s how to administer procainamide:

- **Orally**—Initial dosage is 50 mg/kg/day of conventional formulation in divided doses every 3 hours until a therapeutic level is reached. For maintenance, an extended-release form is substituted to deliver the total daily dose divided every 6 hours. An extended-release form may be used to deliver the dose divided every 12 hours.
- **I.M.**—Initial daily dosage is 50 mg/kg divided into equal doses every 3 to 6 hours.

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**Herbs can affect the way quinidine works. Ask your patient about herb use.**
ANTIARRHYTHMICS BY CLASS

- I.V.—Slow injection of 100 mg is given with the patient in a supine position, no faster than 25 to 50 mg/minute until the arrhythmia is suppressed, adverse effects develop, or 500 mg has been given. The usual loading dose is 500 to 600 mg.
- I.V. infusion—Infuse at 2 to 6 mg/minute for a maintenance dosage. Maximum total dose is 17 mg/kg.

What can happen

Adverse cardiovascular effects of procainamide include bradycardia, hypotension, worsening heart failure, AV block, ventricular fibrillation, and asystole. (See Noncardiac adverse effects of procainamide.)

How you intervene

Keep the following points in mind when caring for a patient taking procainamide:
- Monitor the patient’s heart rate, blood pressure, and ECG. Notify the practitioner if the patient has hypotension or if you notice widening of the QRS complex by 25% or more. Also report a prolonged QT interval if it’s more than one-half of the R-R interval—a sign that the patient is predisposed to developing polymorphic VT.
- Warn the patient taking procainamide orally not to chew it, which might cause him to get too much of the drug at once.
- Monitor serum drug levels. (See Monitoring procainamide.)
- Remember that procainamide should be avoided in patients with second- or third-degree AV block who don’t have pacemakers and in patients with blood dyscrasias, thrombocytopenia, myasthenia gravis, profound hypotension, or known hypersensitivity to the drug. Procainamide may also aggravate digoxin toxicity.

Noncardiac adverse effects of procainamide

In addition to adverse cardiovascular effects of procainamide, other dose-related adverse effects include:
- Central nervous system—mental depression, hallucinations, seizures, confusion, dizziness
- GI—anorexia, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, bitter taste
- Hematologic—agranulocytosis, hemolytic anemia, thrombocytopenia, neutropenia
- Skin—rash, urticaria
- Other—fever, lupuslike syndrome in long-term therapy.

Monitoring procainamide

For patients taking procainamide, you’ll need to monitor serum drug levels and the active metabolite N-acetylprocainamide (NAPA) to prevent toxic reactions. To suppress ventricular arrhythmias, the therapeutic serum concentration of procainamide should range between 4 and 8 mcg/ml. Therapeutic levels of NAPA should average between 10 and 30 mcg/ml.
Class Ib antiarrhythmics

Class Ib antiarrhythmics include such drugs as lidocaine. Because of their actions on the heart, these drugs are effective in suppressing ventricular ectopy but aren’t used with supraventricular arrhythmias. (See Effects of class Ib antiarrhythmics.) These drugs slow phase 0 depolarization and shorten phase 3 repolarization and the action potential. They don’t affect conductivity.

Lidocaine

Lidocaine was once the drug of choice for suppressing ventricular arrhythmias; however, amiodarone is now favored. When lidocaine is used, a patient is generally first given a loading dose of the drug and then an infusion of it.

How to give it

Here’s how to administer lidocaine:
• I.V. bolus injection—Administer 1 to 1.5 mg/kg (usually 50 to 100 mg) at 25 to 50 mg/minute and repeat every 3 to 5 minutes to a maximum of 300 mg total bolus during a 1-hour period.
• I.V. infusion immediately following the bolus dose—Infuse at 1 to 4 mg/minute.

Effects of class Ib antiarrhythmics

Class Ib antiarrhythmic drugs—such as lidocaine and tocainide—may affect the QRS complexes, as shown on the rhythm strip below. They may also prolong the PR interval. These drugs:

- block sodium influx during phase 0, which depresses the rate of depolarization
- shorten repolarization and the duration of the action potential
- suppress ventricular automaticity in ischemic tissue.

The QRS complex is slightly widened.

As ordered, administer an antiarrhythmic such as lidocaine to help suppress ventricular ectopy.
What can happen
Cardiovascular adverse effects of lidocaine include hypotension, bradycardia, new or worsened arrhythmias, and cardiac arrest. (See Noncardiac adverse effects of lidocaine.)

How you intervene
Keep the following points in mind when caring for a patient receiving lidocaine:
• Monitor the patient’s heart rate, blood pressure, and ECG.
• Watch for signs and symptoms of drug toxicity. Seizures may be the first sign of toxicity. The potential for toxicity is increased if the patient has liver disease, is elderly, is taking cimetidine (Tagamet) or propranolol (Inderal), or receives an infusion of the drug for longer than 24 hours.
• Avoid use of the drug in patients known to be hypersensitive to it or in severe SA, AV, or intraventricular block in the absence of an artificial pacemaker.
• Administer cautiously with other antiarrhythmics.

Class Ic antiarrhythmics
Class Ic antiarrhythmic drugs include flecainide (Tambocor) and propafenone (Rythmol). These drugs slow conduction without affecting the duration of the action potential. (See Effects of class Ic antiarrhythmics, page 214.) Because of their proarrhythmic potential, these drugs are used only for life-threatening or ventricular arrhythmias.

Flecainide
Flecainide is used to treat paroxysmal atrial fibrillation or flutter in patients without structural heart disease and with life-threatening ventricular arrhythmias such as sustained VT. It’s also used to prevent paroxysmal supraventricular tachycardia.

How to give it
The dosage for flecainide is 50 to 200 mg orally every 12 hours, to a maximum of 400 mg/day for life-threatening ventricular arrhythmias and a maximum of 300 mg/day for the prevention of paroxysmal supraventricular tachycardia and paroxysmal atrial fibrillation or flutter in patients without structural heart disease.

What can happen
Adverse cardiovascular effects of flecainide include bradycardia, chest pain, palpitations, heart failure, new or worsened
214

Effects of class Ic antiarrhythmics

Class Ic antiarrhythmic drugs—including flecainide and propafenone—cause the effects shown below on an ECG by exerting particular actions on the cardiac cycle. Class Ic antiarrhythmics block sodium influx during phase 0, which depresses the rate of depolarization. The drugs exert no effect on repolarization or the duration of the action potential.

- The PR interval is prolonged.
- The QT interval is prolonged.
- The QRS complex is widened.

How you intervene

Keep the following points in mind when caring for a patient taking flecainide:

- Monitor the patient’s heart rate, blood pressure, and ECG. Report widening of the QRS complex by 25% or more, and watch closely for signs of heart failure.
- Use flecainide cautiously in sick sinus syndrome or in patients with heart, kidney, or liver failure. Avoid its use entirely in second-

Noncardiac adverse effects of flecainide

In addition to adverse cardiovascular effects of flecainide, other adverse effects include:

- Central nervous system—headache, drowsiness, dizziness, syncope, fatigue, blurred vision, tremor, ataxia, vertigo, light-headedness, paresthesia, flushing
- Respiratory—dyspnea
- GI—nausea, vomiting, constipation, abdominal pain, diarrhea, anorexia
- Hematologic—neutropenia.
or third-degree AV block, in bifascicular blocks, and when the patient doesn’t have a pacemaker.
• Administer flecainide cautiously in patients receiving amiodarone (Cordarone), cimetidine, digoxin, or a beta-adrenergic blocker.
• Correct electrolyte imbalances before starting flecainide therapy.

Propafenone
Propafenone slows conduction in all cardiac tissues. The drug is used only for life-threatening ventricular arrhythmias.

How to give it
The usual dosage of propafenone is 150 to 300 mg orally every 8 hours, to a maximum dosage of 900 mg/day.

What can happen
Propafenone’s adverse effects on the cardiovascular system include heart failure, AV block, chest pain, bradycardia, atrial fibrillation, bundle-branch block, hypotension, and such proarrhythmias as VT, ventricular fibrillation, and PVCs. (See Noncardiac adverse effects of propafenone, page 216.)

How you intervene
Keep the following points in mind when caring for a patient taking propafenone:
• Monitor the patient’s heart rate, blood pressure, and ECG. Report widening of the QRS complex greater than 25%. If widening occurs, the dosage may need to be reduced. Monitor the patient closely for heart failure.
• Correct electrolyte imbalances before starting propafenone therapy.
• Remember that propafenone should be avoided in patients with heart failure, cardiogenic shock, sick sinus syndrome without a pacemaker, bronchospastic disorders, hypotension, or SA, AV, or bifascicular blocks.
• Administer propafenone cautiously in patients also receiving cimetidine, other antiarrhythmics such as quinidine, or a beta-adrenergic blocker.
• Be aware that patients receiving digoxin along with propafenone may have increased plasma concentration of digoxin, leading to digoxin toxicity.
• Use cautiously in patients also taking warfarin (Coumadin); propafenone can increase the plasma concentration of the anticoagulant.
• Instruct the patient to report recurrent or persistent infections.
Class II antiarrhythmics

Class II antiarrhythmic drugs are used to treat supraventricular and ventricular arrhythmias, especially those caused by excess catecholamines. The drugs are called beta-adrenergic blockers because they block beta-adrenergic receptors in the sympathetic nervous system. (See Effects of class II antiarrhythmics.)

Two types of beta-adrenergic receptors exist: beta₁ and beta₂. Beta₁-adrenergic receptors increase heart rate, contractility, and conductivity. Blocking those receptors decreases the actions listed above.

Beta₂-adrenergic receptors relax smooth muscle in the bronchi and blood vessels. Keep in mind that blocking these receptors may result in vasoconstriction and bronchospasm.

Beta-adrenergic blockers that block only beta₁-adrenergic receptors are referred to as cardioselective. Those that block both beta₁-adrenergic and beta₂-adrenergic receptors are referred to as noncardioselective.

Noncardiac adverse effects of propafenone

In addition to adverse cardiovascular effects of propafenone, other adverse effects include:

- **Central nervous system**—dizziness, blurred vision, fatigue, headache, paresthesia, anxiety, ataxia, drowsiness, insomnia, syncope, tremors
- **Respiratory**—dyspnea
- **GI**—unusual taste, nausea, vomiting, dyspepsia, constipation, diarrhea, abdominal pain, dry mouth, flatulence
- **Hematologic**—anemia, agranulocytosis, thrombocytopenia, leukopenia
- **Other**—joint pain, rash, diaphoresis.
esmolol (Brevibloc), which is a short-acting, cardioselective drug administered by I.V. titration, that decreases heart rate, contractility, and blood pressure.

sotalol (Betapace), which is a noncardioselective drug that also has class III characteristics, decreases heart rate, slows AV conduction, decreases cardiac output, lowers systolic and diastolic blood pressure, and has proarrhythmic effects and increases the QT interval.

How to give it

These four beta-adrenergic blockers should be administered as follows:

- acebutolol—The normal dosage is 200 mg orally twice daily, increased as needed to a usual dosage of 600 to 1,200 mg daily.
- propranolol—It may be given orally or I.V. The oral dosage is 10 to 30 mg three or four times daily. The I.V. dose is 0.5 to 3 mg, at a rate not to exceed 1 mg/minute. If necessary, a second I.V. dose may be administered after 2 minutes; subsequent doses may be given no sooner than every 4 hours.
- esmolol—The loading dose is 500 mcg/kg over 1 minute, then 50 mcg/kg/minute for 4 minutes. If an adequate response doesn’t
occur within 5 minutes, repeat the loading dose and infuse 100 mcg/kg/minute for 4 minutes. If needed, increase infusion to a maximum of 200 mcg/kg/minute.

• sotalol—The initial dosage is 80 mg orally twice daily. Most patients respond to a daily dose of 160 to 320 mg.

What can happen
The adverse effects of beta-adrenergic blockers on the cardiovascular system may vary, but they include bradycardia, hypotension, AV block, heart failure, chest pain, and palpitations. (See Noncardiac adverse effects of class II beta-adrenergic blockers.)

How you intervene
Keep the following points in mind when caring for a patient taking a beta-adrenergic blocker:
• Monitor the patient’s heart rate, blood pressure, and ECG.
• Remember that beta-adrenergic blockers should be avoided in patients with bradycardia, second- or third-degree AV block without a pacemaker, and shock. Use them cautiously in patients with diabetes mellitus (they mask the signs of hypoglycemia), heart failure, kidney disease, hyperthyroidism, liver disease, myasthenia gravis, peripheral vascular disease, and hypotension.
• Keep in mind that noncardioselective beta-adrenergic blockers are contraindicated in patients with asthma or other bronchospastic disease.
• Correct electrolyte imbalances before starting therapy with a beta-adrenergic blocker.
• Remember that beta-adrenergic blockers diminish the patient’s ability to withstand exercise because the heart rate can’t increase. These drugs also block sympathetic response to shock.

Noncardiac adverse effects of class II beta-adrenergic blockers
In addition to adverse cardiovascular effects of class II beta-adrenergic blockers, other adverse effects include:
• Central nervous system—insomnia, syncope, mental depression, emotional lability, fatigue, headache, dizziness, lethargy, vivid dreams, hallucinations, light-headedness
• Respiratory—dyspnea, bronchospasm, especially in patients with asthma or other bronchospastic disease
• Hematologic—thrombocytopenia, agranulocytosis, alterations in blood glucose level
• Skin—rash.
Class III antiarrhythmics

Class III antiarrhythmics are called potassium channel blockers. (See Effects of class III antiarrhythmics.) They include amiodarone hydrochloride (Cordarone), ibutilide (Corvert), and dofetilide (Tikosyn). Sotalol has qualities of both class II and class III antiarrhythmics. All class III antiarrhythmics have proarrhythmic potential.

Amiodarone

Amiodarone is used to treat supraventricular arrhythmias, paroxysmal supraventricular tachycardia caused by ventricular arrhythmias and accessory pathway conduction, as in Wolff-Parkinson-White (WPW) syndrome.

How to give it

Here’s how to administer amiodarone:

- **Orally**—Give 800 to 1,600 mg daily in divided doses for 1 to 3 weeks, followed by 650 to 800 mg/day for 4 weeks, followed by 200 to 600 mg/day as a maintenance dosage.
- **I.V. infusion**—Infuse 150 mg over 10 minutes (15 mg/minute); then infuse 360 mg over the next 6 hours (1 mg/minute), followed by 540 mg infused over 18 hours (0.5 mg/minute). After the first 24 hours, a maintenance I.V. infusion of 720 mg/24 hours (0.5 mg/minute) should be continued.
What can happen

Adverse cardiovascular effects of amiodarone given by I.V. infusion include bradycardia, hypotension, AV block, heart failure, asystole, and pulseless electrical activity.

Long-term oral therapy is associated with bradycardia, sinus arrest, SA block, AV block, pulmonary fibrosis, thyroid dysfunction, elevated liver function tests, and vision disturbances. (See Noncardiac adverse effects of amiodarone.)

How you intervene

Keep the following points in mind when caring for a patient taking amiodarone:

- Monitor the patient’s vital signs, ECG, and respiratory status.
- Monitor laboratory test results, such as electrolyte levels, liver function studies, thyroid function studies, pulmonary function studies, and chest X-rays.
- Check for signs of digoxin toxicity or increased prothrombin time. Amiodarone can increase the serum levels of digoxin and oral anticoagulants.
- Remember that amiodarone should be avoided in patients with hypersensitivity to the drug, cardiogenic shock, marked sinus bradycardia, and second- or third-degree AV block without a pacemaker. Use the drug cautiously in patients with cardiomegaly, preexisting bradycardia or sinus node disease, conduction disturbances, or depressed ventricular function.
- Be aware that the drug has a long half-life (56 days) and therefore takes a long time to reach therapeutic levels and to be cleared by the body.

Noncardiac adverse effects of amiodarone

In addition to adverse cardiovascular effects of amiodarone, other adverse effects include:

- **Central nervous system** — malaise, fatigue, dizziness, peripheral neuropathy, ataxia, paresthesia, tremors, headache, vision disturbances
- **Respiratory** — pulmonary toxicity (progressive dyspnea, cough, fever, pleuritic chest pain)
- **GI** — nausea, vomiting, constipation, anorexia, elevated liver function tests
- **Other** — photosensitivity, abnormal taste and smell, hypothyroidism or hyperthyroidism, bleeding disorders, muscle weakness.
• Know that amiodarone may increase theophylline levels in patients taking theophylline. Monitor the patient for signs of theophylline toxicity.
• Be aware that amiodarone may increase phenytoin (Dilantin) levels. Monitor phenytoin levels closely.
• Instruct the patient to wear sunscreen and protective clothing to avoid photosensitivity reactions. A blue-gray discoloration of exposed skin may occur.
• Recommend that the patient have yearly ophthalmic examinations. Within 1 to 4 months after beginning amiodarone therapy, most patients show corneal microdeposits upon slit-lamp ophthalmic examination. Instillation of methylcellulose ophthalmic solution minimizes corneal microdeposits.
• Administer the I.V. drug through a central venous access device to avoid phlebitis.

**Ibutilide**

Ibutilide is used for the rapid conversion of recent-onset atrial fibrillation or flutter to sinus rhythm. The drug increases atrial and ventricular refractoriness.

**How to give it**

If your adult patient weighs greater than 132 lb (60 kg) or more, he’ll receive 1 mg of ibutilide I.V. over 10 minutes. If he weighs less than 132 lb, the dose is 0.01 mg/kg.

If the arrhythmia is still present 10 minutes after the infusion is complete, the dose may be repeated.

**What can happen**

Adverse cardiovascular effects of ibutilide include PVCs, nonsustained VT, sustained polymorphic VT, hypotension, bundle-branch block, AV block, hypertension, bradycardia, tachycardia, palpitations, heart failure, and lengthening of the QT interval. Noncardiac adverse effects include headache, nausea, and renal failure.

**How you intervene**

Keep these points in mind when giving ibutilide:
• Monitor the patient’s vital signs and ECG continuously during the infusion and for at least 4 hours afterward. The infusion will be stopped if the arrhythmia terminates or if the patient develops VT or marked prolongation of the QT interval, which signals the possible development of polymorphic VT.
• Have emergency equipment and medication nearby for the treatment of sustained VT.
• Don’t give ibutilide to patients with a history of polymorphic VT.
• Give the drug cautiously in patients receiving digoxin (Lanoxin) because it can mask signs and symptoms of cardiotoxicity associated with excessive digoxin levels.
• Don’t administer ibutilide at the same time or within 4 hours of class Ia or other class III antiarrhythmics.
• Don’t give ibutilide with other drugs that prolong the QT interval, such as phenothiazines and tricyclic or tetracyclic antidepressants.
• Be aware that patients with atrial fibrillation that has lasted longer than 2 days must receive anticoagulants for at least 3 weeks before the initiation of ibutilide therapy unless thrombosis is ruled out.

Dofetilide
Dofetilide is used to maintain normal sinus rhythm in patients with symptomatic atrial fibrillation or atrial flutter lasting longer than 1 week who have been converted to normal sinus rhythm. It’s also used to convert atrial fibrillation and atrial flutter to normal sinus rhythm.

How to give it
Dosage is based on creatinine clearance and QT-c interval, which must be determined before the first dose (QT interval should be used if the heart rate is less than 60 beats/minute). The usual recommended dosage is 500 mcg orally twice per day for patients with a creatinine clearance greater than 60 ml/minute.

What can happen
Adverse cardiovascular effects of dofetilide include ventricular fibrillation, VT, torsades de pointes, AV block, bundle-branch block, heart block, chest pain, angina, atrial fibrillation, hypertension, palpitations, bradycardia, edema, cardiac arrest, and MI. (See Noncardiac adverse effects of dofetilide.)

How you intervene
Remember these facts when giving dofetilide:
• Use cautiously in patients with severe hepatic impairment.
• Provide continuous ECG monitoring for at least 3 days.
• Avoid discharging the patient within 12 hours of conversion to normal sinus rhythm.
• Monitor the patient for prolonged diarrhea, sweating, and vomiting. Report these signs to the practitioner because electrolyte imbalance may increase the potential for arrhythmia development.
• Assess for hypokalemia and hypomagnesemia if the patient is receiving potassium-depleting diuretics, which increase the risk of torsades de pointes. Potassium level should be within normal range before giving dofetilide and kept in normal range.
Noncardiac adverse effects of dofetilide

In addition to adverse cardiovascular effects of dofetilide, other adverse effects include:
- **Central nervous system**—headache, dizziness, insomnia, anxiety, migraine, cerebral ischemia, stroke, asthenia, paresthesia, syncope
- **GI**—nausea, diarrhea, abdominal pain
- **Genitourinary**—urinary tract infection
- **Hepatic**—liver damage
- **Musculoskeletal**—back pain, arthralgia, facial paralysis
- **Respiratory**—respiratory tract infection, dyspnea, increased cough
- **Skin**—rash, sweating
- **Other**—flu syndrome, angioedema.

- Stop antiarrhythmic therapy under careful monitoring for a minimum of three plasma half-lives before starting dofetilide.
- Don’t give dofetilide after amiodarone therapy until the amiodarone level is below 0.3 mcg/ml or until amiodarone has been stopped for at least 3 months.
- Provide a wash-out period of at least 2 days before starting other drug therapy if dofetilide is stopped to allow treatment with other drugs (such as those that interact with dofetilide).
- Don’t give dofetilide with grapefruit juice; it may decrease hepatic metabolism and increase the drug level.
- Don’t give with drugs that prolong the QT interval, such as phenothiazines and tricyclic or tetracyclic antidepressants.
- Avoid using with cimetidine (Tagamet), ketoconazole (Nizoral), co-trimoxazole (Bactrim), verapamil (Calan), and inhibitors of CYP3A4, such as amiodarone (Cordarone), diltiazem (Cardizem), norfloxacin (Noroxin), and selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors.
- Avoid using with inhibitors of renal cationic secretion, such as megestrol (Megace), amiloride (Midamor), metformin (Glucophage), and triamterene (Dyrenium).

Class IV antiarrhythmics

Class IV antiarrhythmic drugs are called calcium channel blockers. They include verapamil and diltiazem. These drugs prolong conduction time and the refractory period in the AV node. (See Effects of class IV antiarrhythmics, page 224.)

Other calcium channel blockers, including nifedipine (Procardia), don’t cause electrophysiologic changes and aren’t used as antiarrhythmics. They’re used primarily to treat hypertension.
Verapamil

Verapamil is used for paroxysmal supraventricular tachycardia because of its effect on the AV node. It also slows the ventricular response in atrial fibrillation and flutter.

How to give it

Here's how to administer verapamil:
- Orally for chronic atrial fibrillation—Give 80 to 120 mg three or four times per day to a maximum of 480 mg/day.
- I.V. injection for supraventricular arrhythmias—Give 0.075 to 0.15 mg/kg (usually 5 to 10 mg) over 2 minutes; you can repeat in 30 minutes if no response occurs.

What can happen

Cardiovascular adverse effects of verapamil include bradycardia, AV block, hypotension, heart failure, edema, and ventricular fibrillation. (See Noncardiac adverse effects of verapamil.)

How you intervene

Keep the following points in mind when caring for a patient taking verapamil:
- Monitor the patient's heart rate, blood pressure, and ECG. Also monitor liver function studies.
Antiarrhythmics by Class

Note that calcium may be given before verapamil to prevent hypotension.

Advise the patient to change position slowly to avoid orthostatic hypotension.

Remember that verapamil should be avoided in sick sinus syndrome or second- or third-degree AV block without a pacemaker and in atrial fibrillation or flutter caused by WPW syndrome. It also should be avoided in patients with hypersensitivity to the drug, advanced heart failure, cardiogenic shock, profound hypotension, acute MI, or pulmonary edema.

Give the drug cautiously to patients receiving digoxin or oral beta-adrenergic blockers, elderly patients, and patients with heart failure, hypotension, liver disease, or kidney disease. Don’t give verapamil to patients receiving IV beta-adrenergic blockers.

Diltiazem

Diltiazem is administered IV to treat paroxysmal supraventricular tachycardia and atrial fibrillation or flutter. Diltiazem is also used to treat angina and hypertension, but those uses aren’t discussed here.

How to give it

Here’s how to give diltiazem:
• I.V. injection—Give 0.25 mg/kg (usually 20 mg) over 2 minutes; you can repeat in 15 minutes at 0.35 mg/kg (usually 25 mg) over 2 minutes.
• I.V. infusion—Infuse at a rate of 5 to 15 mg/hour (usually 10 mg/hour).

What can happen

Adverse cardiovascular effects of diltiazem include edema, flushing, bradycardia, hypotension, heart failure, arrhythmias, conduction abnormalities, sinus node dysfunction, and AV block. (See Noncardiac adverse effects of diltiazem, page 226.)
**PHARMACOLOGIC TREATMENTS**

**How you intervene**

Keep the following points in mind when caring for a patient receiving diltiazem:
- Monitor the patient’s heart rate, blood pressure, and ECG.
- Diltiazem should be avoided in patients with sick sinus syndrome or second- or third-degree AV block without a pacemaker, atrial fibrillation or flutter due to WPW syndrome, advanced heart failure, cardiogenic shock, profound hypotension, acute MI, pulmonary edema, or sensitivity to the drug.
- Use cautiously in elderly patients; in patients with heart failure, hypotension, or liver or kidney disease; and in those receiving digoxin or beta-adrenergic blockers. (See *Prolonged effects in elderly patients*.)
- Give cautiously to patients receiving I.V. beta-adrenergic blockers. I.V. diltiazem and I.V. beta-adrenergic blocker shouldn’t be given within a few hours of each other.
- Advise the patient to change position slowly to avoid orthostatic hypotension.

**Unclassified antiarrhythmics**

Some antiarrhythmic drugs defy categorization. Let’s look at some of those drugs, which are called unclassified or miscellaneous antiarrhythmic drugs.

**Adenosine**

Adenosine is a naturally occurring nucleoside used to treat paroxysmal supraventricular tachycardia. It acts on the AV node to slow conduction and inhibit reentry pathways. It’s also useful in treating paroxysmal supraventricular tachycardia associated with WPW syndrome.

**Prolonged effects in elderly patients**

Administer diltiazem cautiously to an older adult because the half-life of the drug may be prolonged. Be especially careful if the older adult also has heart failure or impaired hepatic or renal function.
Although adenosine isn’t effective for atrial fibrillation or atrial flutter, it does slow the rate in paroxysmal supraventricular tachycardia enough to determine the rhythm so that a more appropriate agent, such as verapamil, can be used.

**How to give it**

Administer 6 mg of adenosine I.V. over 1 to 2 seconds, immediately followed by a rapid flush with 20 ml of normal saline solution. Because the drug’s half-life is less than 10 seconds, it needs to reach the circulation quickly. Repeat with an I.V. injection of 12 mg of adenosine if the rhythm doesn’t convert within 1 to 2 minutes.

**What can happen**

Adverse cardiovascular effects of adenosine include transient arrhythmias such as a short asystolic pause at the time of conversion. Other adverse effects include hypotension (if large doses are used), facial flushing, diaphoresis, chest pressure, and recurrence of the arrhythmia. (See *Noncardiac adverse effects of adenosine.*

**How you intervene**

Keep the following points in mind when caring for a patient receiving adenosine:

- Monitor the patient’s heart rate, blood pressure, ECG, ventilatory rate and depth, and breath sounds for wheezes.
- Remember that adenosine should be avoided in patients with hypersensitivity to the drug, second- or third-degree AV block, or sick sinus syndrome without a pacemaker. Use cautiously in older adults and in patients with asthma or those receiving dipyridamole (Persantine) or carbamazepine (Tegretol).
- Store adenosine at room temperature.
- Be aware that the patient may require a higher dose or may not respond to therapy at all if he’s also taking aminophylline or another xanthine derivative.

**Noncardiac adverse effects of adenosine**

In addition to adverse cardiovascular effects of adenosine, other adverse effects include:

- **Central nervous system**—anxiety, light-headedness, burning sensation, headache, numbness and tingling in arms
- **Respiratory**—dyspnea
- **GI**—nausea.
Atropine

Atropine is an anticholinergic drug that blocks vagal effects on the SA and AV nodes. This enhances conduction through the AV node and speeds the heart rate. Atropine is used to treat symptomatic bradycardia and asystole. However, atropine is ineffective in patients following dissection of the vagus nerve during heart transplant surgery. Isoproterenol (Isuprel) can be used to treat symptomatic bradycardia in these patients.

How to give it

Administer atropine by a 0.5- to 1-mg I.V. injection repeated as needed at 3- to 5-minute intervals, to a maximum dose of 2 mg. The initial dose for asystole is 1 mg. The maximum dose is 3 mg.

What can happen

Adverse cardiovascular effects of atropine include tachycardia (with high doses), palpitations, bradycardia if given slowly or in a dose of less than 0.5 mg, hypotension, and chest pain and increased myocardial oxygen consumption in patients with coronary artery disease. (See Noncardiac adverse effects of atropine.)

How you intervene

Keep the following points in mind when caring for a patient receiving atropine:

- Monitor the patient’s heart rate, blood pressure, ECG, urine output, and bowel sounds.
- Remember that atropine should be avoided in patients with hypersensitivity to belladonna, acute angle-closure glaucoma, GI obstruction, obstructive uropathy, myasthenia gravis, and tachyarrhythmias.
- Use atropine cautiously in patients with renal disease, heart failure, hyperthyroidism, hepatic disease, hypertension, and

Noncardiac adverse effects of atropine

In addition to cardiovascular effects of atropine, other adverse effects include:

- **Central nervous system**—ataxia, disorientation, delirium, agitation, confusion, headache, restlessness, insomnia, dizziness, blurred vision, dilated pupils, photophobia
- **GI**—dry mouth, constipation, paralytic ileus, nausea, vomiting
- **Genitourinary**—urine retention
- **Other**—increased intraocular pressure, anaphylaxis, urticaria.
acute MI. Don’t give atropine for bradycardia unless the patient is symptomatic. Increasing the heart rate in these patients can lead to increased myocardial oxygen consumption and a worsening of the infarction.

**Digoxin**

Digoxin (Lanoxin) is used to treat paroxysmal supraventricular tachycardia and atrial fibrillation and flutter, especially in patients with heart failure. It provides antiarrhythmic effects by enhancing vagal tone and slowing conduction through the SA and AV nodes. It also strengthens myocardial contraction. Digoxin has visible effects on the patient’s ECG. (See Effects of digoxin.)

**How to give it**

To administer digoxin rapidly and orally or I.V., give a digitalizing dose of 0.5 to 1 mg divided into two or more doses every 6 to 8 hours. The usual maintenance dosage is 0.125 to 0.5 mg daily.

**What can happen**

Too much digoxin in the body causes toxicity. Toxic cardiac effects include SA and AV blocks and junctional and ventricular arrhythmias. Digoxin toxicity is treated by discontinuing digoxin;
correcting oxygenation and electrolyte imbalances; treating arrhythmias with phenytoin, lidocaine, atropine, or a pacemaker; giving digoxin immune fab (Digibind) to reverse life-threatening arrhythmias or blocks (occurs within 30 to 60 minutes); and correcting the potassium level before giving digoxin immune fab. (See Noncardiac adverse effects of digoxin.)

**How you intervene**

Keep the following points in mind when caring for a patient receiving digoxin:
- Check for signs of digoxin toxicity, especially in patients with hypokalemia, hypocalcemia, hypercalcemia, or hypomagnesemia. Monitor serum electrolyte levels as ordered.
- Monitor the patient’s apical heart rate and ECG. A heart rate below 60 beats/minute or a change in rhythm can signal digoxin toxicity. If this occurs, withhold digoxin and notify the practitioner.
- Remember that digoxin should be avoided in patients with known hypersensitivity to the drug, sick sinus syndrome, SA or AV block, VT, hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, or WPW syndrome. Use cautiously in older adults and in patients with acute MI, liver or kidney disease, or hypothyroidism.
- Withhold digoxin for 1 to 2 days before performing electrical cardioversion.
- Be sure to question the patient about herbal preparation use because digoxin reacts with many preparations. Fumitory, lily of the valley, goldenseal, motherwort, shepherd’s purse, and rue may enhance the cardiac effects of digoxin. Licorice, oleander, Siberian ginseng, foxglove, and squill may increase the risk of digoxin toxicity.

**Epinephrine**

Epinephrine is a naturally occurring catecholamine. It acts directly on alpha-adrenergic and beta-adrenergic receptor sites of the sympathetic nervous system, and it’s used to help restore cardiac rhythm in cardiac arrest and to treat symptomatic bradycardia. Its actions include increasing the systolic blood pressure and slightly decreasing diastolic blood pressure, heart rate, and cardiac output.

**How to give it**

To restore sinus rhythm in cardiac arrest in adults, administer epinephrine by I.V. injection as a 1-mg dose (10 ml of 1:10,000 solution). Each dose given by peripheral I.V. injection should be followed by a 20-ml flush of I.V. fluid to ensure quick delivery of the drug. Doses may be repeated every 3 to 5 minutes as needed. (Some practitioners advocate doses of up to 5 mg, especially for patients who don’t respond to the usual I.V. dose.) After initial I.V. administration, an infusion may be given at 1 to 4 mcg/minute.

**Noncardiac adverse effects of digoxin**

In addition to adverse cardiovascular effects of digoxin, other adverse effects resulting from toxicity include:
- **Central nervous system**—headache, vision disturbances, hallucinations, fatigue, muscle weakness, agitation, malaise, dizziness, stupor, paresthesia
- **GI**—anorexia, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea
- **Other**—yellow-green halos around visual images, blurred vision, light flashes, photophobia, diplopia.
What can happen

Adverse cardiovascular effects include palpitations, hypertension, tachycardia, ventricular fibrillation, anginal pain, shock, and ECG changes, including a decreased T-wave amplitude. (See Noncardiac adverse effects of epinephrine.)

How you intervene

Keep these points in mind when administering epinephrine:

• Be sure to document the concentration of the epinephrine solution used. (Remember that 1 mg equals 1 ml of 1:1,000 or 10 ml of 1:10,000 concentration.)
• When administering I.V. epinephrine, monitor the patient’s heart rate, ECG rhythm, and blood pressure throughout therapy.
• Don’t mix the drug with alkaline solutions. Use D5W, lactated Ringer’s solution, or normal saline solution or a combination of dextrose and saline solution.
• Remember that some epinephrine products contain sulfites. Use of those products usually should be avoided in patients with sulfite allergies. The only exception is when epinephrine is being used in an emergency.
• Know that the use of epinephrine with digoxin (Lanoxin) or such general anesthetics as cyclopropane or a halogenated hydrocarbon like halothane (Fluothane) may increase the risk of ventricular arrhythmias.
• Avoid giving epinephrine with other drugs that exert a similar effect. Doing so can cause severe adverse cardiovascular effects.

Magnesium sulfate

Magnesium sulfate is used to treat ventricular arrhythmias, especially polymorphic VT and paroxysmal atrial tachycardia. It’s also used as a preventive measure in acute MI. Magnesium sulfate acts similarly to class III antiarrhythmic drugs because it decreases myocardial cell excitability and conduction. It slows conduction through the AV node and prolongs the refractory period in the atria and ventricles.

How to give it

For life-threatening arrhythmias, administer 1 to 2 g magnesium sulfate over 5 to 60 minutes. Follow with an infusion of 0.5 to 1 g/hour. The dosage and duration of therapy depend on the patient’s response and serum magnesium levels. The optimum dosage is still under study.
What can happen

Adverse cardiovascular effects of magnesium sulfate include diaphoresis, flushing, depressed cardiac function, bradycardia, hypotension, and circulatory collapse. (See Noncardiac adverse effects of magnesium sulfate.)

How you intervene

Keep the following points in mind when caring for a patient receiving magnesium sulfate:

- Monitor the patient’s heart rate, blood pressure, ventilatory rate, ECG, urine output, deep tendon reflexes, and mental status.
- Remember that magnesium sulfate should be avoided in patients with renal disease. Use it cautiously in patients with renal insufficiency and in those taking digoxin.
- Monitor closely for signs and symptoms of hypermagnesemia, such as hypotension, AV block, central nervous system depression, depressed or absent deep tendon reflexes, muscle weakness or paralysis, and respiratory arrest.
- Have I.V. calcium available to counteract the effects of hypermagnesemia.
- Have intubation equipment and a mechanical ventilator available.
- Magnesium sulfate is contraindicated in heart block and in patients with myocardial damage.

Teaching about antiarrhythmics

Here are some important points to emphasize when teaching your patient about antiarrhythmic drugs:

- Take the drug exactly as prescribed. Don’t stop taking the drug without consulting your practitioner.
- Call the practitioner if you experience chest pain, shortness of breath, cough, palpitations, dizziness, fatigue, a weight gain of more than 2 lb (0.9 kg) per day, a very fast or slow heart rate, or a change in the regularity of the heartbeat or if you notice persistent changes you feel might be related to drug therapy.
- See your practitioner for regular checkups, as scheduled. Periodic physical examinations, ECGs, chest X-rays, and laboratory studies will help evaluate the effectiveness of therapy.
- Use herbal preparations with care. Some preparations can cause life-threatening interactions.

Noncardiac adverse effects of magnesium sulfate

In addition to adverse cardiovascular effects of magnesium sulfate, other adverse effects include:

- **Central nervous system**—drowsiness, depressed reflexes, flaccid paralysis, hypothermia
- **Respiratory**—respiratory paralysis
- **Other**—hypocalcemia.
Antiarrhythmic drugs
- Classified according to effect on the cell’s electrical activity (action potential) and mechanism of action

Class Ia antiarrhythmics
- Are called sodium channel blockers
- Reduce excitability of cardiac cells and decrease contractility
- Have anticholinergic and proarrhythmic effects
- Show widened QRS complex and prolonged QT intervals on ECG

Quinidine
- Used for supraventricular and ventricular arrhythmias

Procainamide hydrochloride
- Used for supraventricular and ventricular arrhythmias

Class Ib antiarrhythmics
- Suppress ventricular ectopy
- Slow phase 0 depolarization
- Shorten phase 3 repolarization and action potential

Lidocaine hydrochloride
- Former drug of choice for suppressing ventricular arrhythmias

Class Ic antiarrhythmics
- Slow conduction

Flecainide acetate
- Used for paroxysmal atrial fibrillation or flutter in patients without structural heart disease and with life-threatening ventricular arrhythmias; prevents supraventricular tachycardia

Propafenone hydrochloride
- Used only for life-threatening ventricular arrhythmias

Class II antiarrhythmics
- Are called beta-adrenergic blockers
- Block sympathetic nervous system beta receptors and decrease heart rate
- Used to treat supraventricular and ventricular arrhythmias
- Include acebutolol, propranolol, esmolol, and sotalol

Class III antiarrhythmics
- Are called potassium channel blockers
- Block potassium movement during phase 3
- Increase the duration of the action potential
- Prolong the effective refractory period
- Show prolonged PR and QT intervals and widened QRS complex on ECG

Amiodarone
- Used for supraventricular arrhythmias, PSVT caused by accessory pathway conduction (as in Wolff-Parkinson-White syndrome), and ventricular arrhythmias
Pharmacologic treatments review (continued)

**Ibutilide fumarate**
- Rapidly converts recent-onset atrial fibrillation or flutter

**Dofetilide**
- Used for maintenance of normal sinus rhythm in patients with atrial fibrillation or flutter lasting longer than 1 week who have been converted to normal sinus rhythm
- Used to convert atrial fibrillation and flutter to normal sinus rhythm

**Class IV antiarrhythmics**
- Are called calcium channel blockers
- Prolong conduction time and refractory period in the AV node
- Decrease contractility
- Show PR interval prolonged on ECG

**Verapamil**
- Used for PSVT and to slow ventricular response in atrial fibrillation and flutter

**Diltiazem**
- Used for PSVT and atrial fibrillation or flutter

**Unclassified antiarrhythmics**
- Also called miscellaneous antiarrhythmics

**Adenosine**
- Slows AV node conduction and inhibits reentry pathways
- Used to treat PSVT

**Atropine**
- Anticholinergic drug that blocks vagal effects on the SA and AV nodes
- Used to treat symptomatic bradycardia and asystole

**Digoxin**
- Enhances vagal tone and slows conduction through the SA and AV nodes
- Shows ST-segment depression opposite the QRS deflection on ECG; P wave may be notched
- Used to treat PSVT and atrial fibrillation and flutter

**Epinephrine**
- Catecholamine that acts on alpha-adrenergic and beta-adrenergic receptor sites of the sympathetic nervous system
- Used for symptomatic bradycardia and to restore cardiac rhythm in cardiac arrest

**Magnesium sulfate**
- Decreases cardiac cell excitability and conduction; slows conduction through the AV node and prolongs the refractory period
- Used to treat ventricular arrhythmias
Quick quiz

1. Antiarrhythmic drugs that depress the rate of depolarization belong to class:
   A. I.
   B. II.
   C. III.
   D. IV.

   Answer: A. Class I antiarrhythmic drugs block sodium influx during phase 0, depressing the rate of depolarization.

2. The drug that blocks vagal stimulation and increases the heart rate is:
   A. magnesium sulfate.
   B. diltiazem.
   C. verapamil.
   D. atropine.

   Answer: D. Atropine blocks vagal effects on the SA node, enhances conduction through the node, and speeds the heart rate. The drug is used to treat symptomatic bradycardia.

3. The class III antiarrhythmic drug used for the rapid conversion of recent-onset atrial fibrillation or flutter to sinus rhythm is:
   A. digoxin.
   B. ibutilide fumarate.
   C. procainamide.
   D. verapamil.

   Answer: B. Ibutilide fumarate increases atrial and ventricular refractoriness and is used for the rapid conversion of recent-onset atrial fibrillation or flutter.

4. A drug known for lowering the resting heart rate is:
   A. quinidine.
   B. amiodarone.
   C. propranolol.
   D. lidocaine.

   Answer: C. Beta-adrenergic blockers, such as propranolol, block sympathetic nervous system beta-adrenergic receptors and lower heart rate, contractility, and conduction.
Scoring

⭐⭐⭐ If you answered all four questions correctly, just say “wow”!
      You’re the antiarrhythmic drug czar.
⭐⭐ If you answered three questions correctly, great job! You’re the deputy antiarrhythmic drug czar.
⭐ If you answered fewer than three questions correctly, don’t fret.
     Get into the rhythm of antiarrhythmics by reviewing this chapter again.
Obtaining a 12-lead ECG

In this chapter, you’ll learn:

- the role of the 12-lead ECG in diagnosing pathologic conditions
- the relationship between the heart’s electrical axis and the 12-lead ECG
- proper technique for preparing your patient, placing the electrodes, and recording the ECG
- diagnostic purposes of the posterior-lead ECG and the right chest-lead ECG
- function of a signal-averaged ECG.

Just the facts

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- the relationship between the heart’s electrical axis and the 12-lead ECG
- proper technique for preparing your patient, placing the electrodes, and recording the ECG
- diagnostic purposes of the posterior-lead ECG and the right chest-lead ECG
- function of a signal-averaged ECG.

A look at the 12-lead ECG

The 12-lead ECG is a diagnostic test that helps identify pathologic conditions, especially angina and acute myocardial infarction (MI). It gives a more complete view of the heart’s electrical activity than a rhythm strip and can be used to assess left ventricular function. Patients with other conditions that affect the heart’s electrical system may also benefit from a 12-lead ECG. (See Why a 12-lead ECG?)

Interdependent evidence

Like other diagnostic tests, a 12-lead ECG must be viewed alongside other clinical evidence. Always correlate the patient’s ECG results with his history, physical assessment findings, laboratory results, and medication regimen.

Remember, too, that an ECG can be done in various ways, including over a telephone line. (See Transtelephonic cardiac monitoring, page 240.) Transtelephonic monitoring, in fact, has become increasingly important as a tool for assessing patients at home and in other nonclinical settings.

Why a 12-lead ECG?

A 12-lead ECG is usually performed on patients having a myocardial infarction. It may also be ordered for patients with other conditions that affect the heart, including:

- angina
- arrhythmias
- heart chamber enlargement
- digoxin or other drug toxicity
- electrolyte imbalances
- pulmonary embolism
- pericarditis
- hypothermia.
How leads work

The 12-lead ECG records the heart’s electrical activity using a series of electrodes placed on the patient’s extremities and chest wall. The 12 leads include three bipolar limb leads (I, II, and III), for admitting the patient for evaluation and a potentially lengthy hospital stay.

Understanding TTM equipment

TTM requires three main pieces of equipment: an ECG recorder-transmitter, a standard telephone line, and a receiver. The ECG recorder-transmitter converts electrical activity picked up from the patient’s heart into acoustic waves. Some models contain built-in memory that stores a recording of the activity so the patient can transmit it later.

A standard telephone line is used to transmit information. The receiver converts the acoustic waves transmitted over the telephone line into ECG activity, which is then recorded on ECG paper for interpretation and documentation in the patient’s chart. The recorder-transmitter uses an electrode applied to the finger, chest, or a wrist bracelet. These electrodes produce ECG tracings similar to those of a standard 12-lead ECG.

Credit card–size recorder

One type of recorder operates on a battery and is about the size of a credit card. When a patient becomes symptomatic, he holds the back of the card firmly to the center of his chest and pushes the start button. Four electrodes located on the back of the card sense electrical activity and record it. The card can store 30 seconds of activity and can later transmit the recording across phone lines for evaluation by a practitioner.
A LOOK AT THE 12-LEAD ECG

three unipolar augmented limb leads \((aV_R, aV_L, \text{ and } aV_F)\), and six unipolar precordial, or chest, leads \((V_1, V_2, V_3, V_4, V_5, \text{ and } V_6)\). These leads provide 12 different views of the heart’s electrical activity. (See A look at the leads.)

A look at the leads

Each of the 12 leads views the heart from a different angle. These illustrations show the direction of each lead relative to the wave of depolarization (shown in color) and list the 12 views of the heart.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Views reflected on a 12-lead ECG</th>
<th>Leads</th>
<th>View of the heart</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Standard limb leads (bipolar)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Lateral wall</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>II</td>
<td>Inferior wall</td>
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<td></td>
<td>III</td>
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<td>Augmented limb leads (unipolar)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>aV_R</td>
<td>No specific view</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>aV_L</td>
<td>Lateral wall</td>
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<td></td>
<td>aV_F</td>
<td>Inferior wall</td>
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<td>Precordial, or chest, leads (unipolar)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>V_1</td>
<td>Septal wall</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>V_6</td>
<td>Lateral wall</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Up, down, and across**

Scanning up, down, and across the heart, each lead transmits information about a different area. The waveforms obtained from each lead vary depending on the location of the lead in relation to the wave of depolarization, or electrical stimulus, passing through the myocardium.

**Limb leads**

The six limb leads record electrical activity in the heart’s frontal plane. This plane is a view through the middle of the heart from top to bottom. Electrical activity is recorded from the anterior to the posterior axis.

**Precordial leads**

The six precordial leads provide information on electrical activity in the heart’s horizontal plane, a transverse view through the middle of the heart, dividing it into upper and lower portions. Electrical activity is recorded from either a superior or an inferior approach.

**The electrical axis**

Besides assessing 12 different leads, a 12-lead ECG records the heart’s electrical axis. The axis is a measurement of electrical impulses flowing through the heart.

As impulses travel through the heart, they generate small electrical forces called *instantaneous vectors*. The mean of these vectors represents the force and direction of the wave of depolarization through the heart. That mean is called the *electrical axis*. It’s also called the *mean instantaneous vector* and the *mean QRS vector*.

**Havin’ a heart wave**

In a healthy heart, impulses originate in the sinoatrial node, travel through the atria to the atrioventricular node, and then to the ventricles. Most of the movement of the impulses is downward and to the left, the direction of a normal axis.

**Swingin’ on an axis**

In an unhealthy heart, axis direction varies. That’s because the direction of electrical activity swings away from areas of damage or necrosis and toward areas of hypertrophy. Knowing the normal deflection of each lead will help you evaluate whether the electrical axis is normal or abnormal.
Obtaining a 12-lead ECG

You may be required to obtain an ECG in an emergency. To obtain the ECG, you’ll need to:
- gather the appropriate supplies
- explain the procedure to the patient
- attach the electrodes properly
- know how to use an ECG machine
- interpret the recordings.

Let’s take a look at each aspect of the procedure.

Preparing for the recording

First, gather all the necessary supplies, including the ECG machine, recording paper, electrodes, and gauze pads. Take them to the patient’s bedside. Then perform these actions.

Explain the procedure

Tell the patient that the practitioner has ordered an ECG, and explain the procedure. Emphasize that the test takes only a few minutes and that it’s a safe and painless way to evaluate cardiac function.

Answer the patient’s questions, and offer reassurance. Preparing him well helps alleviate anxiety and promote cooperation.

Prepare the patient

Ask the patient to lie in a supine position in the center of the bed with his arms at his sides. If he can’t tolerate lying flat, raise the head of the bed to semi-Fowler’s position. Ensure privacy, and expose the patient’s arms, legs, and chest, draping him for comfort. (See Obtaining a pediatric ECG.)

Select the electrode sites

Select the areas where you’ll attach the electrodes. Choose spots that are flat and fleshy, not muscular or bony. Clip the area if it’s excessively hairy. Clean excess oil or other substances from the skin to enhance electrode contact. Remember—the better the electrode contact, the better the recording.

Make the recording

The 12-lead ECG offers 12 different views of the heart, just as 12 photographers snapping the same picture would produce 12 different snapshots. To help ensure an accurate recording—or set of “pictures”—the electrodes must be applied correctly. Inaccurate placement of an electrode by greater than \( \frac{5}{8} \) (1.5 cm) from its standardized position may lead to inaccurate waveforms and an incorrect ECG interpretation.
The 12-lead ECG requires four electrodes on the limbs and six across the front of the chest wall.

**Going out on a limb lead**

To record the bipolar limb leads I, II, and III and the unipolar limb leads aVR, aVL, and aVF, place electrodes on both of the patient’s arms and on his left leg. The right leg also receives an electrode, but that electrode acts as a ground and doesn’t contribute to the waveform.

**Where the wires go**

Finding where to place the electrodes on the patient is easy because each leadwire is labeled or color coded. (See *Monitoring the limb leads.* For example, a wire—usually white—might be labeled “RA” for right arm. Another wire—usually red—might be labeled “LL” for left leg. Precordial leads are also labeled or color coded according to which wire corresponds to which lead.

**No low leads allowed**

To record the six precordial leads (V1 through V6), position the electrodes on specific areas of the anterior chest wall. (See *Positioning precordial electrodes,* page 247.) If they’re placed too low, the ECG tracing will be inaccurate.

- Place lead V1 over the fourth intercostal space at the right sternal border. To find the space, locate the sternal notch at the second rib and feel your way down along the sternal border until you reach the fourth intercostal space.
- Place lead V2 just opposite V1, over the fourth intercostal space at the left sternal border.
- Place lead V3 midway between V2 and V4. *Tip:* Placing lead V4 before lead V3 makes it easier to see where to place lead V3.
- Place lead V4 over the fifth intercostal space at the left midclavicular line.
- Place lead V5 over the fifth intercostal space at the left anterior axillary line.
- Place lead V6 over the fifth intercostal space at the left midaxillary line. If you’ve placed leads V4 through V6 correctly, they should line up horizontally.

**Give me more electrodes!**

In addition to the 12-lead ECG, two other ECGs may be used for diagnostic purposes: the posterior-lead ECG and the right chest-lead ECG. These ECGs use chest leads to assess areas standard 12-lead ECGs can’t.
Monitoring the limb leads

These diagrams show electrode placement for the six limb leads. RA indicates right arm; LA, left arm; RL, right leg; and LL, left leg. The plus sign (+) indicates the positive pole, the minus sign (−) indicates the negative pole, and G indicates the ground. Below each diagram is a sample ECG recording for that lead.

**Lead I**
This lead connects the right arm (negative pole) with the left arm (positive pole).

**Lead II**
This lead connects the right arm (negative pole) with the left leg (positive pole).

**Lead III**
This lead connects the left arm (negative pole) with the left leg (positive pole).
**Monitoring the limb leads (continued)**

**Lead aVR**
This lead connects the right arm (positive pole) with the heart (negative pole).

**Lead aVL**
This lead connects the left arm (positive pole) with the heart (negative pole).

**Lead aVF**
This lead connects the left leg (positive pole) with the heart (negative pole).

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**Seeing behind your back**

Because of lung and muscle barriers, the usual chest leads can’t “see” the heart’s posterior surface to record myocardial damage there. Some practitioners add three posterior leads to the 12-lead ECG: leads V7, V8, and V9. These leads are placed opposite anterior leads V4, V5, and V6, on the left side of the patient’s back, following the same horizontal line.
A LOOK AT THE 12-LEAD ECG

On rare occasions, a practitioner may request right-sided posterior leads. These leads are labeled $V_{7R}$, $V_{8R}$, and $V_{9R}$ and are placed on the right side of the patient’s back. Their placement is a mirror image of the electrodes on the left side of the back. This type of ECG provides information on the right posterior area of the heart.

Checking out the right chest

The usual 12-lead ECG evaluates only the left ventricle. If the right ventricle needs to be assessed for damage or dysfunction, the practitioner may order a right chest lead ECG. For example, a patient with an inferior wall MI might have a right chest-lead ECG to rule out right ventricular involvement.

With this type of ECG, the six leads are placed on the right side of the chest in a mirror image of the standard precordial lead placement. Electrodes start at the left sternal border and swing down under the right breast area.
Know your machine

After you understand how to position the electrodes, familiarize yourself with the ECG machine. Machines come in two types: multichannel recorders and single-channel recorders. Because single-channel recorders are rarely used, we’ll only discuss a multichannel recorder.

With a multichannel recorder, you’ll attach all electrodes to the patient at once and the machine prints a simultaneous view of all leads. To begin recording the patient’s ECG, follow these steps:

- Plug the cord of the ECG machine into a grounded outlet. If the machine operates on a charged battery, it may not need to be plugged in.
- Enter the patient’s identification data as prompted by the ECG machine.
- Prepare the patient’s skin, and then place the electrodes on the patient’s chest, arms, and legs.
- Make sure all leads are securely attached.
- Instruct the patient to relax, lie still, and breathe normally. Ask him not to talk during the recording to prevent distortion of the ECG tracing.
- Verify that the ECG paper speed selector is set to 25 mm/second. If necessary, calibrate or standardize the machine according to the manufacturer’s instructions.
- Press the appropriate button to record the ECG. If you’re performing a right chest–lead ECG, select the appropriate button for recording or note it on the ECG hardcopy.
- Observe the quality of the tracing. When the machine finishes the recording, turn it off.
- Remove the electrodes and, if necessary, clean the patient’s skin. If the ECG machine you’re using also transmits a copy to a central monitoring area, make sure the copy has been transmitted.

Interpreting the recording

ECG tracings from multichannel machines will all look the same. (See Multichannel ECG recording.) The printout will show the patient’s name and identification number. At the top of the printout, you’ll see the patient’s heart rate and wave durations, measured in seconds.

Some machines can also record ST-segment elevation and depression. The name of the lead appears next to each 6-second strip.
Get out your pen

If not already present on the printout, be sure to write the date, time, practitioner’s name, and special circumstances. For example, you might record an episode of chest pain, abnormal electrolyte level, related drug treatment, abnormal placement of the electrodes, or the presence of an artificial pacemaker and whether a magnet was used while the ECG was obtained.

Remember, ECGs are legal documents. They belong on the patient’s chart and must be saved for future reference and comparison with baseline strips.

Multichannel ECG recording

The top of a 12-lead ECG recording usually shows patient identification information along with the interpretation done by the machine. A rhythm strip is usually included at the bottom of the recording.

**Standardization marks**

Look for the standardization marks on the recording, normally 10 small squares high. If the patient has high voltage complexes, the marks will be half as high. You’ll also notice that lead markers separate the lead recordings on the paper and that each lead is labeled.

**ECG tracing layout**

Also familiarize yourself with the order in which the leads are arranged on the ECG tracing. Getting accustomed to the layout of the tracing will help you interpret the ECG more quickly and accurately.
Signal-averaged ECG

Although most patients will be tested with a 12-lead ECG, some may benefit from being tested with a signal-averaged ECG. This simple, noninvasive test helps identify patients at risk for sudden death from sustained ventricular tachycardia.

The test uses a computer to identify late electrical potentials—tiny impulses that follow normal depolarization. Late electrical potentials can’t be detected by a 12-lead ECG.

Who gets the signal?

Patients prone to ventricular tachycardia—those who have had a recent MI or unexplained syncope, for example—are good candidates for a signal-averaged ECG. Keep in mind that a 12-lead ECG should be done when the patient is free from arrhythmias.

Noise free

A signal-averaged ECG is a noise-free, surface ECG recording taken from three specialized leads for several hundred heartbeats. (See Electrode placement for a signal-averaged ECG.) The test

Electrode placement for a signal-averaged ECG

Electrodes are placed much differently for a signal-averaged ECG than they are for a 12-lead ECG. Here’s one method:

1. Place the positive X electrode at the left fourth intercostal space, midaxillary line.
2. Place the negative X electrode at the right fourth intercostal space, midaxillary line.
3. Place the positive Y electrode at the left iliac crest.
4. Place the negative Y electrode at the superior aspect of the manubrium of the sternum.
5. Place the positive Z electrode at the fourth intercostal space left of the sternum.
6. Place the ground (G) on the lower right at the eighth rib.
7. Reposition the patient on his side, or have him sit forward. Then place the negative Z electrode on his back, directly posterior to the positive Z electrode.
8. Attach all the leads to the electrodes, being careful not to dislodge the posterior lead.

Now, you can obtain the tracing.
SIGNAL-AVERAGED ECG

takes approximately 10 minutes. The machine’s computer detects late electrical potentials and then enlarges them so they’re recognizable. The electrodes for a signal-averaged ECG are labeled X−, X+, Y−, Y+, Z−, Z+, and G.

The machine averages signals from these leads to produce one representative QRS complex without artifacts. This process cancels noise, electrical impulses that don’t occur as a repetitious pattern or with the same consistent timing as the QRS complex. That additional noise is filtered out so late electrical potentials can be detected. Muscle noise can’t be filtered, however, so the patient must lie still for the test.

That’s a wrap!

Obtaining a 12-lead ECG

12-lead ECG basics
- Provides 12 different views of the heart’s electrical activity

The limb leads
- Three bipolar limb leads: I, II, and III
- Three unipolar limb leads: aVR, aVL, and aVF
- Record electrical activity in the heart’s frontal plane, providing a view through the middle of the heart from top to bottom

The precordial leads
- Six unipolar precordial (chest) leads: V1 through V6
- Record electrical activity in the heart’s horizontal plane, providing a transverse view through the middle of the heart, dividing it into upper and lower portions

Electrical axis
- Measurement of the electrical impulses flowing through the heart
- Normal axis downward and to the left
- Direction of electrical activity swings away from areas of damage or necrosis and toward areas of hypertrophy

Placing the leads
- Bipolar and unipolar limb leads: electrodes on both arms and the left leg, ground on right leg
  - V1: Over fourth intercostal space at the right sternal border
  - V2: Over fourth intercostal space at the left sternal border
  - V5: Midway between leads V2 and V4
  - V6: Over fifth intercostal space at left midclavicular line
  - V5: Over fifth intercostal space at left anterior axillary line
  - V6: Over fifth intercostal space at left midaxillary line

Views of the heart walls
- Lead I: Lateral wall
- Lead II: Inferior wall
- Lead III: Inferior wall
- Lead aVR: No specific view
- Lead aVL: Lateral wall
- Lead aVF: Inferior wall
- Lead V1: Septal wall
- Lead V2: Septal wall
- Lead V3: Anterior wall

(continued)
Obtaining a 12-lead ECG (continued)

- Lead V₁: Anterior wall
- Lead V₂: Lateral wall
- Lead V₆: Lateral wall

**Other lead placements**
- Posterior leads: V₇, V₈, and V₉ are placed opposite V₄, V₅, and V₆ on the left side of the back to view posterior surface of the heart
- Right chest leads: placed on right chest in mirror image of standard precordial leads to view right ventricle

**Types of ECGs**
- Multichannel ECG: all electrodes attached at one time to provide simultaneous views of all leads
- Signal-averaged ECG: use of computer to identify late electrical potentials from three specialized leads over hundreds of beats; identifies patients at risk for sudden cardiac death from ventricular tachycardia

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**Quick quiz**

1. The precordial leads are placed on the:
   A. anterior chest starting with the fourth intercostal space at the right sternal border.
   B. lateral chest starting with the fourth intercostal space at the left midaxillary line.
   C. posterior chest wall starting with the fourth intercostal space at the midscapular line.
   D. left leg and both arms.

   **Answer:** A. Lead V₁ is placed anteriorly between the fourth and fifth ribs at the right sternal border. Leads V₂ to V₆ are then placed accordingly.

2. A 12-lead ECG is used to assess function of the:
   A. right ventricle.
   B. left ventricle.
   C. right and left ventricle simultaneously.
   D. right and left atria simultaneously.

   **Answer:** B. A 12-lead ECG gives a more complete view of the heart’s electrical activity than a rhythm strip and is used to assess left ventricular function.
3. A posterior-lead ECG is used to assess:
   A. posterior myocardial damage.
   B. inferior myocardial damage.
   C. damage to the interventricular septum.
   D. damage to the base of the heart.
   
   **Answer:** A. The posterior-lead ECG assesses damage to the posterior surface of the heart, an area a standard 12-lead ECG can’t detect.

4. When recording a 12-lead ECG, the paper speed should be set at:
   A. 10 mm/second.
   B. 20 mm/second.
   C. 25 mm/second.
   D. 50 mm/second.
   
   **Answer:** C. The correct paper speed for a 12-lead ECG is 25 mm/second.

5. A signal-averaged ECG measures:
   A. electrical impulses from the sinoatrial node.
   B. electrical impulses arriving at the atrioventricular node.
   C. action potentials of individual cardiac cells.
   D. late electrical potentials throughout the heart.
   
   **Answer:** D. Signal-averaged ECGs measure late electrical potentials, tiny electrical impulses that occur after depolarization and can cause ventricular tachycardia.

6. To record the bipolar limb leads I, II, and III and the unipolar limb leads aVR, aVL, and aVF, place electrodes on:
   A. both of the patient’s arms and left leg, with a ground on his right leg.
   B. the patient’s right arm and left leg, with a ground on his left arm.
   C. both of the patient’s legs and his left arm, with a ground on his right arm.
   D. both of the patient’s arms and his right leg, with a ground on his left leg.
   
   **Answer:** A. To record these bipolar and unipolar limb leads, place electrodes on both of the patient’s arms and left leg, with a ground on his right leg.
7. On the 12-lead ECG printout, you should write:
   A. date, practitioner’s name, patient’s name, and your signature.
   B. date, time, practitioner’s name, and special circumstances.
   C. practitioner’s name, patient’s name, and your signature.
   D. patient’s name, room number, and date.

   Answer: B. On the printout, be sure to write the date, time, practitioner’s name, and special circumstances.

   **Scoring**
   ✭✭✭ If you answered all seven questions correctly, great job! You’re the new leader of the 12-lead ECG pack.
   ✭✭ If you answered six questions correctly, we’re impressed! Your leadership qualities are obvious, and you should be next in line for a top job.
   ✭ If you answered fewer than six questions correctly, that’s okay! You’ll be sure to take the lead in the next chapter.
Interpreting a 12-lead ECG

**Just the facts**

In this chapter, you’ll learn:

- the way to examine each lead’s waveforms for abnormalities
- techniques for determining the heart’s electrical axis
- ECG changes in patients with angina
- ECG characteristics that can help you differentiate the types of acute myocardial infarction
- 12-lead ECG changes that occur with a bundle-branch block.

**A look at 12-lead ECG interpretation**

To interpret a 12-lead ECG, use the systematic approach outlined here. Try to compare the patient’s previous ECG with the current one, if available, to help you identify changes.

- Check the ECG tracing to see if it’s technically correct. Make sure the baseline is free from electrical interference and drift.
- Lead aVR is typically negative. If it isn’t, the leads may be placed incorrectly.
- Locate the lead markers on the waveform. Lead markers are the points where one lead changes to another.
- Check the standardization markings to make sure all leads were recorded with the ECG machine’s amplitude at the same setting. Standardization markings are usually located at the beginning of the strip.
Assess the heart rate and rhythm as you learned in earlier chapters.

Determine the heart’s electrical axis. Use either the quadrant method or the degree method, described later in this chapter.

Examine limb leads I, II, and III. The R wave in leads I and II should be dominant with upright P and T waves. The R wave in lead III may be dominant or absent, with upright, flat, or inverted P and T waves. Each lead should have flat ST segments and pathologic Q waves should be absent.

Examine limb leads aVL, aVF, and aVR. The tracings from leads aVL and aVF should be similar, but lead aVF should have taller P and R waves. Lead aVR has little diagnostic value. Its P wave, QRS complex, and T wave should be deflected downward.

Examine the R wave in the precordial leads. Normally, the R wave — the first positive deflection of the QRS complex — gets progressively taller from lead V1 to lead V6. Then it gets slightly smaller in lead V6. (See R-wave progression.)

Examine the S wave — the negative deflection after an R wave — in the precordial leads. It appears extremely deep in lead V1 and becomes progressively more shallow, usually disappearing at lead V5 or V6.

**R-wave progression**

These waveforms show normal R-wave progression through the precordial leads. Note that the R wave is the first positive deflection in the QRS complex. Also note that the S wave gets smaller, or regresses, from lead V1 to V6 until it finally disappears.
All about waves

As you examine each lead, note where changes occur so you can identify the area of the heart that’s affected. Remember that P waves should be upright; however, they may be inverted in lead aVR or biphasic or inverted in leads III, aVL, and V1.

PR intervals should always be constant, just like QRS-complex durations. QRS-complex deflections will vary in different leads. Observe for pathologic Q waves. (See Normal findings in pediatric ECGs.)

Elevated one minute, depressed the next

ST segments should be isoelectric or have minimal deviation. ST-segment elevation greater than 1 mm above the baseline and ST-segment depression greater than 0.5 mm below the baseline are considered abnormal. Leads facing an injured area will have ST-segment elevations, and leads facing away will display ST-segment depressions.

That old, changeable T wave

The T wave should be slightly rounded and upright. It normally deflects upward in leads I, II, and V3 through V6. It may also be inverted in lead III, aVR, aVF, aVL, and V1. T waves shouldn’t be tall, peaked, or notched. T-wave changes have many causes and aren’t always a reason to become alarmed. Excessively tall, flat, or inverted T waves occurring with symptoms such as chest pain indicate ischemia.

Split-second duration

A normal Q wave generally has a duration of less than 0.04 second. An abnormal Q wave has either a duration of 0.04 second or more, a depth greater than 4 mm, or a height one-fourth of the R wave.

Abnormal Q waves indicate myocardial necrosis. These waves develop when depolarization can’t take its normal path because of damaged tissue in the area. Remember that lead aVR normally has a large Q wave, so disregard this lead when searching for abnormal Q waves.

Finding the electrical axis

The electrical axis is the average direction of the heart’s electrical activity during ventricular depolarization. Leads placed on the body sense the sum of the heart’s electrical activity and record it as waveforms.
Cross my heart

You can determine your patient’s electrical axis by examining the waveforms recorded from the six frontal plane leads: I, II, III, aV R, aV L, and aV F. Imaginary lines drawn from each of the leads intersect the center of the heart and form a diagram known as the hexaxial reference system. (See Hexaxial reference system.)

Where the axis falls

An axis that falls between 0 and +90 degrees is considered normal. An axis between +90 and +180 degrees indicates right axis deviation, and one between 0 and –90 degrees indicates left axis deviation.
deviation. An axis between −180 and −90 degrees indicates extreme axis deviation and is called an indeterminate axis.

To determine your patient’s electrical axis, use one of the two methods described here, the quadrant method or the degree method. (See Axis deviation across the life span.)

**Quadrant method**

The quadrant method, a fast, easy way to plot the heart’s axis, involves observing the main deflection of the QRS complex in leads I and aVF. (See Quadrant method.) Lead I indicates whether impulses are moving to the right or left, and lead aVF indicates whether they’re moving up or down.
If the QRS-complex deflection is positive or upright in both leads, the electrical axis is normal. If lead I is upright and lead aVF points down, left axis deviation exists.

**Right on and right in**

When lead I points downward and lead aVF is upright, right axis deviation exists. Both waves pointing down signal extreme axis deviation.

**Degree method**

A more precise axis calculation, the degree method gives an exact degree measurement of the electrical axis. (See *Degree method*.) It also allows you to determine the axis even if the QRS complex isn’t clearly positive or negative in leads I and aVF. To use this method, follow these steps.

1. Review all six leads, and identify the one that contains either the smallest QRS complex or the complex with an equal deflection above and below the baseline.

2. Use the hexaxial diagram to identify the lead perpendicular to this lead. For example, if lead I has the smallest QRS complex, then the lead perpendicular to the line representing lead I would be lead aVF.

3. After you’ve identified the perpendicular lead, examine its QRS complex. If the electrical activity is moving toward the positive pole of a lead, the QRS complex deflects upward. If it’s moving away from the positive pole of a lead, the QRS complex deflects downward.

4. Plot this information on the hexaxial diagram to determine the direction of the electrical axis.

**Axis deviation**

Finding a patient’s electrical axis can help confirm a diagnosis or narrow the range of possible diagnoses. (See *Causes of axis deviation*, page 262.) Factors that influence the location of the axis include the heart’s position in the chest, the heart’s size, the patient’s body size or type, the conduction pathways, and the force of the electrical impulses being generated.

Remember that electrical activity in the heart swings away from areas of damage or necrosis, so the damaged part of the heart will be the last area to be depolarized. For example, in right
Degree method

The degree method of determining axis deviation allows you to identify a patient’s electrical axis by degrees on the hexaxial system, not just by quadrant. To use this method, follow these steps.

**Step 1**
Identify the lead with the smallest QRS complex or the equiphasic QRS complex. In this example, it’s lead III.

**Step 2**
Locate the axis for lead III on the hexaxial diagram. Then find the axis perpendicular to it, which is the axis for lead aVR.

**Step 3**
Now, examine the QRS complex in lead aVR, noting whether the deflection is positive or negative. As you can see, the QRS complex for this lead is negative. This tells you that the electric current is moving toward the negative pole of aVR, which, on the hexaxial diagram, is in the right lower quadrant at +30 degrees. So the electrical axis here is normal at +30 degrees.

bundle-branch block (RBBB), the impulse travels quickly down the normal left side and then moves slowly down the right side. This shifts the electrical forces to the right, causing right axis deviation.
No worries

Axis deviation isn’t always cause for alarm, and it isn’t always cardiac in origin. For example, infants and children normally have right axis deviation. Pregnant women normally have left axis deviation.

Disorders affecting a 12-lead ECG

A 12-lead ECG is used to diagnose such conditions as angina, bundle-branch block, and myocardial infarction (MI). By reviewing sample ECGs, you’ll know what classic signs to look for. Here’s a rundown on these three common cardiac conditions and what 12-lead ECG signs to look for.

Angina

During an episode of angina, the myocardium demands more oxygen than the coronary arteries can deliver. The arteries can’t deliver enough blood, commonly as a result of a narrowing of the arteries from coronary artery disease (CAD), a condition that may be complicated by platelet clumping, thrombus formation, or vasospasm.

An episode of angina usually lasts between 2 and 10 minutes. The closer to 30 minutes the pain lasts, the more likely the pain is from an MI rather than angina.
Stable or unstable?

You may hear the term stable angina applied to certain conditions and unstable angina applied to others. In stable angina, pain is triggered by exertion or stress and is usually relieved by rest. Each episode follows the same pattern.

Unstable angina, which is one of the components of acute coronary syndrome, is more easily provoked, usually waking the patient. It’s also unpredictable and worsens over time. The patient with unstable angina is treated as a medical emergency. The onset of unstable angina commonly indicates an MI.

In addition to ECG changes, the patient with unstable angina will complain of chest pain that may radiate. The pain is generally more intense and lasts longer than the pain of stable angina. The patient may also be pale, clammy, nauseous, and anxious.

Fleeting change of heart

A patient with either form of angina typically shows ischemic changes on the ECG only during the angina attack. (See ECG changes associated with angina.) Because these changes may be fleeting, always obtain an order for, and perform, a 12-lead ECG as soon as the patient reports chest pain.

The ECG will allow you to analyze all parts of the heart and pinpoint which area and coronary artery are involved. By recognizing danger early, you may be able to prevent an MI or even death.

Drugs are a key component of anginal treatment and may include nitrates, beta-adrenergic blockers, calcium channel

ECG changes associated with angina

Here are some classic ECG changes involving the T wave and ST segment that you may see when monitoring a patient with angina.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Peaked T wave</th>
<th>Flattened T wave</th>
<th>T-wave inversion</th>
<th>ST-segment depression with T-wave inversion</th>
<th>ST-segment depression without T-wave inversion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image1" alt="Peaked T wave" /></td>
<td><img src="image2" alt="Flattened T wave" /></td>
<td><img src="image3" alt="T-wave inversion" /></td>
<td><img src="image4" alt="ST-segment depression with T-wave inversion" /></td>
<td><img src="image5" alt="ST-segment depression without T-wave inversion" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
blockers, and aspirin or glycoprotein IIb/IIIa inhibitors to reduce platelet aggregation.

**Bundle-branch block**

One potential complication of an MI is a bundle-branch block. In this disorder, either the left or the right bundle branch fails to conduct impulses. A bundle-branch block that occurs farther down the left bundle, in the posterior or anterior fasciculus, is called a hemiblock.

Some blocks require treatment with a temporary pacemaker. Others are monitored only to detect whether they progress to a more complete block.

**Impulsive behavior**

In a bundle-branch block, the impulse travels down the unaffected bundle branch and then from one myocardial cell to the next to depolarize the ventricle.

Because this cell-to-cell conduction progresses much more slowly than the conduction along the specialized cells of the conduction system, ventricular depolarization is prolonged.

**Wide world of complexes**

Prolonged ventricular depolarization means that the QRS complex will be widened. The normal width of the complex is 0.06 to 0.10 second. If the width increases to greater than 0.12 second, a bundle-branch block is present.

After you identify a bundle-branch block, examine lead V1, which lies to the right of the heart, and lead V6, which lies to the left of the heart. You’ll use these leads to determine whether the block is in the right or left bundle.

**Right bundle-branch block**

RBBB occurs with such conditions as anterior wall MI, CAD, cardiomyopathy, cor pulmonale, and pulmonary embolism. It may also occur without cardiac disease. If this block develops as the heart rate increases, it’s called rate-related RBBB. (See How RBBB occurs.)

In this disorder, the QRS complex is greater than 0.12 second and has a different configuration, sometimes resembling rabbit ears or the letter “M.” (See Recognizing RBBB, page 266.) Septal depolarization isn’t affected in lead V1, so the initial small R wave remains.

The R wave is followed by an S wave, which represents left ventricular depolarization, and a tall R wave (called R prime, or R’), which represents late right ventricular depolarization. The
**DISORDERS AFFECTING A 12-LEAD ECG**

T wave is negative in this lead. However, that deflection is called a secondary T-wave change and is of no clinical significance.

**Opposing moves**

The opposite occurs in lead V6. A small Q wave is followed by depolarization of the left ventricle, which produces a tall R wave. Depolarization of the right ventricle then causes a broad S wave. In lead V6, the T wave should be positive.

**Left bundle-branch block**

Left bundle-branch block (LBBB) never occurs normally. This block is usually caused by hypertensive heart disease, aortic stenosis, degenerative changes of the conduction system, or CAD. (See How LBBB occurs, page 267.) When it occurs along with an anterior wall MI, it usually signals complete heart block, which requires insertion of a pacemaker.
Recognizing RBBB

This 12-lead ECG shows the characteristic changes of right bundle-branch block (RBBB). In lead V₁, note the rsR’ pattern and T-wave inversion. In lead V₆, see the widened S wave and the upright T wave. Also note the prolonged QRS complexes.

One ventricle after another

In LBBB, the QRS complex will be greater than 0.12 second because the ventricles are activated sequentially, not simultaneously. (See Recognizing LBBB, page 268.) As the wave
of depolarization spreads from the right ventricle to the left, a wide S wave is produced in lead V1, with a positive T wave. The S wave may be preceded by a Q wave or a small R wave.

**Slurring your R waves**

In lead V6, no initial Q wave occurs. A tall, notched R wave, or a slurred one, is produced as the impulse spreads from right to left. This initial positive deflection is a sign of LBBB. The T wave is negative.

**Myocardial infarction**

Unlike angina, pain from an MI lasts for at least 20 minutes, may persist for several hours, and is unrelieved by rest. MI usually occurs in the left ventricle, although the location may vary depending on the coronary artery affected.
Recognizing LBBB

This 12-lead ECG shows characteristic changes of left bundle-branch block (LBBB). All leads have prolonged QRS complexes. In lead V₁, note the QS wave pattern. In lead V₆, you’ll see the slurred R wave and T-wave inversion. The elevated ST segments and upright T waves in leads V₁ to V₄ are also common in LBBB.

For as long as the myocardium is deprived of an oxygen-rich blood supply, an ECG will reflect the three pathologic changes of an MI: ischemia, injury, and infarction. (See Reciprocal changes in an MI.)
**Reciprocal changes in an MI**

Ischemia, injury, and infarction — the three I’s of a myocardial infarction (MI) — produce characteristic ECG changes. Changes shown by the leads that reflect electrical activity in damaged areas are shown on the right of the illustration. Reciprocal leads, those opposite the damaged area, will show opposite ECG changes, as shown to the left of the illustration.

**Zone of infarction**

The area of myocardial necrosis is called the zone of infarction. Scar tissue eventually replaces the dead tissue, and the damage caused is irreversible.
The ECG change associated with a necrotic area is a pathologic Q wave, which results from lack of depolarization. Such Q waves are permanent. MIs that don’t produce Q waves are called non–Q-wave MIs. (See Q waves in children.)

**Zone of injury**

The zone of infarction is surrounded by the zone of injury, which shows up on an ECG as an elevated ST segment. ST-segment elevation results from a prolonged lack of blood supply.

**Zone of ischemia**

The outermost area is called the zone of ischemia and results from an interrupted blood supply. This zone is represented on an ECG by T-wave inversion. Changes in the zones of ischemia or injury are reversible.

**From ischemia to injury**

Generally, as an MI occurs, the patient experiences chest pain and an ECG shows changes, such as ST-segment elevation, which indicates that myocardial injury is occurring. You’ll also typically see T waves flatten and become inverted.

Rapid treatment can prevent myocardial necrosis. However, if symptoms persist for more than 6 hours, little can be done to prevent necrosis. That’s one of the reasons patients are advised to seek medical attention as soon as symptoms begin.

**The telltale Q wave**

Q waves can appear hours to days after an MI and signify that an entire thickness of the myocardium has become necrotic. Tall R waves in reciprocal leads can also develop. This type of MI is called a transmural, or Q-wave, MI.

**Back to baseline**

Knowing how long such changes last can help you determine how long ago an MI occurred. ST segments return to baseline within a few days to 2 weeks. Inverted T waves may persist for several months. Although not every patient who has had an MI develops Q waves, those who do may have them on their ECGs indefinitely.

**What to do for an MI**

The most important step you can take for a patient with an MI is to remain vigilant about detecting changes in his condition and in his ECG. (See Monitoring MI patients.)

The primary goal of treatment for an MI is to limit the size of the infarction by decreasing cardiac workload and increasing oxygen supply to the myocardium. (See Improving blood flow.)
In addition to rest, pain relief, and supplemental oxygen, such medications as nitroglycerin, morphine sulfate, beta-adrenergic blockers, calcium channel blockers, angiotensin-converting enzyme inhibitors, and antiarrhythmics are used. Aspirin or glycoprotein IIb/IIIa inhibitors may be used to reduce platelet aggregation. Thrombolytic therapy may also be prescribed to dissolve a thrombus occluding a coronary artery.

### Identifying types of MI

The location of the MI is a critical factor in determining the most appropriate treatment and predicting probable complications. Characteristic ECG changes that occur with each type of MI are localized to the leads overlying the infarction site. (See Locating myocardial damage.) Here's a look at characteristic ECG changes that occur with different types of MI.

### Anterior wall MI

The left anterior descending artery supplies blood to the anterior portion of the left ventricle. The artery supplies blood to the

### Locating myocardial damage

After you’ve noted characteristic lead changes of an acute myocardial infarction, use this chart to identify the areas of damage. Match the lead changes in the second column with the affected wall in the first column and the artery involved in the third column. Column four shows reciprocal lead changes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wall affected</th>
<th>Leads</th>
<th>Artery involved</th>
<th>Reciprocal changes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anterior</td>
<td>V₂ to V₄</td>
<td>Left coronary artery, left anterior descending (LAD) artery</td>
<td>II, III, aVF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anterolateral</td>
<td>I, aV₅₆, V₃ to V₆</td>
<td>LAD artery, circumflex artery</td>
<td>II, III, aVF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Septal</td>
<td>V₁ to V₂</td>
<td>LAD artery</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inferior</td>
<td>II, III, aV₅₆</td>
<td>Right coronary artery</td>
<td>I, aV₅₆</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lateral</td>
<td>I, aV₅₆, V₅₆, V₆</td>
<td>Circumflex artery, branch of left coronary artery</td>
<td>II, III, aVF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posterior</td>
<td>V₈, V₉</td>
<td>Right coronary artery, circumflex artery</td>
<td>V₁ to V₄</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right ventricular</td>
<td>V₄R, V₅R, V₆R</td>
<td>Right coronary artery</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ventricular septum and portions of the right and left bundle-branch systems.

When the anterior descending artery becomes occluded, an anterior wall MI occurs. (See Recognizing an anterior wall MI.)

**Recognizing an anterior wall MI**

This 12-lead ECG shows typical characteristics of an anterior wall myocardial infarction (MI). Note that the R waves don’t progress through the precordial leads. Also note the ST-segment elevation in leads V2 and V3. As expected, the reciprocal leads II, III, and aVF show slight ST-segment depression. Axis deviation is normal at +60 degrees.
Complications of an anterior wall MI include varying second-degree atrioventricular blocks, bundle-branch blocks, ventricular irritability, and left-sided heart failure.

**Changing the leads**

An anterior wall MI causes characteristic ECG changes in leads V₂ to V₄. The precordial leads show poor R-wave progression because the left ventricle can’t depolarize normally. ST-segment elevation and T-wave inversion are also present.

The reciprocal leads for the anterior wall are the inferior leads II, III, and aVF. They show tall R waves and depressed ST segments.

**Septal wall MI**

The patient with a septal wall MI has an increased risk for developing a ventricular septal defect. ECG changes are present in leads V₁ and V₂. In those leads, the R wave disappears, the ST segment rises, and the T wave inverts.

Because the LAD artery also supplies blood to the ventricular septum, a septal wall MI commonly accompanies an anterior wall MI. (See **Recognizing an anteroseptal wall MI**, page 274.)

**Lateral wall MI**

A lateral wall MI is usually caused by a blockage in the left circumflex artery and shows characteristic changes in the left lateral leads I, aVL, V₅, and V₆. The reciprocal leads for a lateral wall infarction are leads II, III, and aVF. (See **Recognizing a lateral wall MI**, page 275.)

This type of infarction typically causes premature ventricular contractions and varying degrees of heart block. A lateral wall MI usually accompanies an anterior or inferior wall MI.

**Inferior wall MI**

An inferior wall MI is usually caused by occlusion of the right coronary artery and produces characteristic ECG changes in the inferior leads II, III, and aVF and reciprocal changes in the lateral leads I and aVL. (See **Recognizing an inferior wall MI**, page 276.) It’s also called a diaphragmatic MI because the heart’s inferior wall lies over the diaphragm.

Patients with inferior wall MI are at risk for developing sinus bradycardia, sinus arrest, heart block, and premature ventricular contractions. This type of MI occurs alone, with a lateral wall MI, or with a right ventricular MI.
Recognizing an anteroseptal wall MI

This 12-lead ECG shows typical characteristics of an anteroseptal wall myocardial infarction (MI). Note the poor R wave progression, the elevated ST segments, and the inverted T waves in leads V1, V2, and V3. Reciprocal changes are seen in leads II, III, and aVF with depressed ST segments and tall, peaked T waves.
Right ventricular MI

A right ventricular MI usually follows occlusion of the right coronary artery. This type of MI rarely occurs alone. In fact, 40% of all patients with an inferior wall MI also suffer a right ventricular MI.
Recognizing an inferior wall MI

This 12-lead ECG shows the characteristic changes of an inferior wall myocardial infarction (MI). In leads II, III, and aVF, note the T-wave inversion, ST-segment elevation, and pathologic Q waves. In leads I and aVL, note the slight ST-segment depression, a reciprocal change. This ECG shows left axis deviation at –60 degrees.

A right ventricular MI can lead to right-sided heart failure or right-sided block. The classic changes are ST-segment elevation, pathologic Q waves, and inverted T waves in the right precordial leads V₄₅ to V₆₅. (See Recognizing a right ventricular MI.)
Recognizing a right ventricular MI

This 12-lead ECG shows typical characteristics of a right ventricular myocardial infarction (MI). Note the T-wave inversion in leads V₃₉R, V₄₉R, V₅₉R, and V₆₉R. Pathologic Q waves and ST-segment elevation are also present.

Take the right lead

Identifying a right ventricular MI is difficult without information from the right precordial leads. If these leads aren’t available, you can observe leads II, III, and aVR or watch leads V₁, V₂, and V₃ for ST-segment elevation. If a right ventricular MI has occurred, use lead II to monitor for further damage.
A posterior wall MI is caused by occlusion of either the right coronary artery or the left circumflex arteries. This MI produces reciprocal changes on leads V₁ and V₂.

Recognizing a posterior wall MI

This 12-lead ECG shows typical characteristics of a posterior wall myocardial infarction (MI). Note the tall R waves, the depressed ST segments, and the upright T waves in leads V₁, V₂, and V₃. These are reciprocal changes, because the leads that best monitor a posterior wall MI (V₇, V₈, and V₉) aren’t on a standard 12-lead ECG.
Classic ECG changes in a posterior wall MI include tall R waves, ST-segment depression, and upright T waves. (See Recognizing a posterior wall MI.) Posterior infarctions usually accompany inferior infarctions. Information about the posterior wall and pathologic Q waves that might occur can be obtained from leads V7 to V9 using a posterior ECG.

**That’s a wrap!**

12-lead ECG interpretation review

**Looking at the waves**

- **P waves**: Upright; possibly inverted in lead aVR or biphasic or inverted in leads III, aV1, and V1
- **PR intervals**: Always constant, like QRS-complex durations
- **QRS-complex deflections**: Variable in different leads
- **Q waves**: Possibly pathologic; duration of less than 0.4 second when normal
- **T wave**: Slightly rounded and upright; normal deflection upward in leads I, II, and V5 through V6; inverted in leads III, aVF, aVR, aVL, and V1; shouldn’t be tall, peaked, or notched
- **ST segments**: should be isoelectric or have minimal deviation

**Electrical axis**

- Average direction of the heart’s electrical activity during ventricular depolarization

**Methods of determining axis**

- **Quadrant method**: Determines main deflection of QRS complex in leads I and aVF
- **Degree method**: Identifies axis by degrees on the hexaxial system

**Examining the waveforms from the six frontal leads**: I, II, III, aVR, aVL, and aVF
- **Normal axis**: Between 0 and +90 degrees
- **Left axis deviation**: Between 0 and –90 degrees
- **Right axis deviation**: Between +90 and +180 degrees
- **Extreme axis deviation**: Between –180 and –90 degrees

**Disorders affecting 12-lead ECGs**

**Angina**

- Possible ECG changes: Peaked or flattened T wave, T-wave inversion, and ST-segment depression with or without T-wave inversion

**Bundle-branch block**

- **QRS complex**: Width increases to greater than 0.12 second with bundle-branch block
- **Lead V1 (to right of heart) and V6 (to left of heart)**: Used to determine whether block is in right or left bundle
- **RBBB**: QRS complex has rsR’ pattern and T-wave inversion in lead V1 and widened S wave and upright T wave in lead V6

(continued)
LBBB: Wide S wave (which may be preceded by a Q wave or small R wave) and small positive T wave in lead V1; tall, notched R wave or slurred R wave and T-wave inversion in lead V6

Myocardial infarction
- Three pathologic changes on ECG — ischemia, injury, and infarction

Pathologic ECG changes
- Zone of ischemia: T-wave inversion
- Zone of injury: ST-segment elevation
- Zone of infarction: Pathologic Q wave in transmural MI

Locating the MI
- Anterior wall: Leads V2 to V4; involves LAD artery
- Septal wall: V1 to V2; involves LAD artery
- Inferior wall: Leads II, III, aVF; involves right coronary artery
- Lateral wall: Leads I, aVL, V5, V6; involves left circumflex artery
- Posterior wall: Leads V7, V8, V9; involves right coronary or left circumflex arteries
- Right ventricular wall: V4R, V5R, V6R; involves right coronary artery

Quick quiz

1. Your patient’s ECG shows positively deflected QRS complexes in leads I and aVF. Using the four-quadrant method for determining the electrical axis, you determine that he has a:
   A. normal axis.
   B. left axis deviation.
   C. right axis deviation.
   D. extreme axis deviation.
   Answer: A. If the QRS-complex deflection is positive or upright in both leads, the electrical axis is normal.

2. Your patient’s ECG shows a negatively deflected QRS complex in lead I and a positively deflected one in lead aVF. Using the four-quadrant method for determining electrical axis, you determine that he has a:
   A. normal axis.
   B. left axis deviation.
   C. right axis deviation.
   D. extreme axis deviation.
   Answer: C. When lead I points downward and lead aVF is upright, right axis deviation exists. Both waves pointing down signals indeterminate axis deviation.
3. If your patient has a T-wave inversion, ST-segment elevation, and pathologic Q waves in leads II, III, and aVF, suspect an acute MI in the:
   A. anterior wall.
   B. inferior wall.
   C. lateral wall.
   D. septal wall.

   Answer: B. Leads II, III, and aVF face the inferior wall of the left ventricle, so the ECG changes there are indicative of an acute inferior wall MI.

4. If a patient’s QRS complex has an R’ wave in V1, suspect:
   A. right ventricular hypertrophy.
   B. left ventricular hypertrophy.
   C. LBBB.
   D. RBBB.

   Answer: D. In RBBB, depolarization of the right ventricle takes longer than normal, thereby creating an R’ wave in lead V1.

5. Myocardial injury is represented on an ECG by the presence of a:
   A. T-wave inversion.
   B. ST-segment elevation.
   C. pathologic Q wave.
   D. ST-segment depression.

   Answer: B. ST-segment elevation is the ECG change that corresponds with myocardial injury. It’s caused by a prolonged lack of blood supply.

6. On a 12-lead ECG, a posterior wall MI produces:
   A. deep, broad Q waves in leads V1 through V4.
   B. inverse or mirror image changes in V1 and V2.
   C. raised ST segments in all leads.
   D. poor R-wave progression in the precordial leads.

   Answer: B. Leads V1 and V2 show reciprocal changes when a posterior wall MI occurs. Look at the mirror images of these leads to determine the presence of a posterior wall MI.

7. An ST segment located 1.5 mm above the baseline is considered:
   A. normal.
   B. slightly depressed.
   C. abnormally elevated.
   D. isoelectric.

   Answer: C. ST segments should be isoelectric or have minimal deviation. ST-segment elevation greater than 1 mm above the baseline is considered abnormal.
**Test strips**

Okay, it’s time to try out a couple of ECG test strips.

**S.** In the 12-lead ECG below, you’ll see an rsR’ pattern in lead V₁, as well as T-wave inversion. Looking at lead V₆, you’ll note a widened S wave and an upright T wave. These changes indicate:

A. right ventricular MI.
B. LBBB.
C. RBBB.
D. angina.

**Answer:** C. The rsR’ configuration in lead V₁ and the wide S wave in V₆ indicate RBBB.
9. Your patient says he thinks he might have had a heart attack about 3 years ago but, because he never went to the doctor, he doesn't know for sure. Looking at his admission ECG, you think he definitely had an MI at some point. You base your assessment on the presence of:

A. pathologic Q waves in leads II, III, and aVF.
B. inverted T waves in leads I, aVL, and V6.
C. depressed ST segments in leads II, aVL, and V5.
D. axis between 0 and +90 degrees.

Answer: A. Old damage to the myocardium is indicated by the presence of pathologic Q waves, in this case in leads II, III, and aVF. Those findings lead you to suspect the patient suffered an inferior wall MI at some point.
Scoring

🌟🌟🌟 If you answered all nine questions correctly, wow! You’ve graduated with honors from the School of 12-Lead ECG Interpretation.

🌟🌟 If you answered seven or eight questions correctly, super! You’re ready to take a graduate course on 12-lead ECG interpretation.

⭐ If you answered fewer than seven questions correctly, you can still get on the right track. Just review your notes from 12-Lead ECG Interpretation 101.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appendix</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Practice makes perfect</td>
<td>286</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACLS algorithms</td>
<td>304</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brushing up on interpretation skills</td>
<td>310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Look-alike ECG challenge</td>
<td>348</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quick guide to arrhythmias</td>
<td>359</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glossary</td>
<td>364</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selected references</td>
<td>366</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
<td>367</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Practice makes perfect

1. You’re caring for a patient with a history of mitral valve prolapse. Based on your knowledge of the heart’s anatomy, you know that the mitral valve is located:
   A. between the left atrium and left ventricle.
   B. where the left ventricle meets the aorta.
   C. between the right atrium and right ventricle.
   D. between the right ventricle and pulmonary artery.

2. A 45-year-old patient is admitted to your floor for observation after undergoing cardiac catheterization. His test results reveal a blockage in the circumflex artery. The circumflex artery supplies oxygenated blood to which area of the heart?
   A. Anterior wall of the left ventricle
   B. Left atrium
   C. Right bundle branch
   D. Right ventricle

3. Which of the following choices is responsible for slowing heart rate?
   A. Norepinephrine (Levophed)
   B. Vagus nerve
   C. Epinephrine
   D. Isoproterenol (Isuprel)

4. Which cycle describes cardiac cells at rest?
   A. Early repolarization
   B. Polarization
   C. Rapid depolarization
   D. Absolute refractory period

5. A patient admitted with an acute myocardial infarction (MI) complains of chest pain. When you look at his ECG monitor, you note a heart rate of 35 beats/minute. Which area of his heart has taken over as the heart’s pacemaker?
   A. Sinoatrial (SA) node
   B. Atrioventricular (AV) node
   C. Bundle of His
   D. Purkinje fibers

6. Which lead on a cardiac monitor is equivalent to V₁ on a 12-lead ECG?
   A. Lead I
   B. Lead MCL₆
   C. Lead aVF
   D. Lead MCL₁
7. A 37-year-old patient comes to the emergency department (ED) complaining of chest pain that began while he was mowing the lawn. You immediately begin cardiac monitoring and administer oxygen. Next you obtain a 12-lead ECG. You know that the six limb leads you apply will give you information about what area of the patient’s heart?
   A. The frontal plane
   B. The horizontal plane
   C. The vertical plane
   D. The posterior plane

8. A patient with heart failure is transferred to your unit from the medical-surgical floor. Before initiating cardiac monitoring you must first:
   A. prepare the skin by rubbing it until it reddens.
   B. press the adhesive edge around the outside of the electrode to the patient’s chest.
   C. press one side of the electrode against the patient’s skin.
   D. attach the clip-on leadwire to the electrode before placing it on the patient’s chest.

9. A 58-year-old patient is admitted with an acute MI. After you begin cardiac monitoring, you note a baseline that’s thick and unreadable. How do you interpret this finding?
   A. Electrical interference
   B. Artifact
   C. Wandering baseline
   D. Weak signal

10. What does the horizontal axis of an ECG represent?
    A. Amplitude
    B. Time
    C. Electrical voltage
    D. Heart rate

11. A 65-year-old patient diagnosed with angina is admitted to your telemetry unit. You begin cardiac monitoring and record a rhythm strip. Using the 8-step method of rhythm strip interpretation, what should you do first?
    A. Calculate the heart rate.
    B. Evaluate the P wave.
    C. Check the rhythm.
    D. Measure the PR interval.
12. A 72-year-old patient calls you to his room because he’s experiencing substernal chest pain that radiates to his jaw. You record a rhythm strip and monitor his vital signs. Which portion of the patient’s ECG complex may become elevated or depressed indicating myocardial damage?
   A. T wave  
   B. ST segment  
   C. QRS complex  
   D. P wave

13. A 76-year-old patient with heart failure is receiving furosemide (Lasix) 40 mg I.V. twice daily. When you look at his rhythm strip, you note prominent U waves. Which condition may have caused U waves to appear on your patient’s rhythm strip?
   A. Hypokalemia  
   B. Hypocalcemia  
   C. Worsening heart failure  
   D. Pericarditis

14. An 80-year-old patient with a history of atrial fibrillation is admitted with digoxin toxicity. When you assess his rhythm strip using the 10-times method, you note that his heart rate is 40 beats/minute. Based on this finding, you should:
   A. check the patient’s pulse and correlate it with the heart rate on the rhythm strip.  
   B. recheck the heart rate on the rhythm strip using the sequence method.  
   C. record another rhythm strip and reassess the heart rate on the rhythm strip.  
   D. recheck the heart rate on the rhythm strip using the 1,500 method.

15. A patient with a history of paroxysmal atrial tachycardia develops digoxin toxicity. Because digoxin toxicity may cause prolongation of the PR interval, you must monitor his rhythm strip closely. What’s the duration of a normal PR interval?
   A. 0.06 to 0.10 second  
   B. 0.12 to 0.20 second  
   C. 0.24 to 0.30 second  
   D. 0.36 to 0.44 second

16. A patient is admitted to your telemetry unit with a diagnosis of sick sinus syndrome. Which medication should you keep readily available to treat a symptomatic event?
   A. Isoproterenol (Isuprel)  
   B. Verapamil (Calan)  
   C. Lidocaine  
   D. Atropine
17. A 45-year-old patient is admitted with an acute MI. In the ED, he received nitroglycerin and morphine to treat his chest pain, and he's currently pain-free. His monitor reveals sinus tachycardia at a rate of 123 beats/minute. Which statement is true regarding sinus tachycardia after acute MI?
   A. Sinus tachycardia is a normal response that typically abates after the first 24 hours.
   B. Sinus tachycardia is a poor prognostic sign because it may be associated with massive heart damage.
   C. Sinus tachycardia is a typical response to morphine administration.
   D. Sinus tachycardia is a sign that the heart is starting to heal.

18. A patient who has been taking digoxin (Lanoxin) suddenly develops the rhythm shown below. What's your interpretation of the rhythm?
   A. Normal sinus rhythm
   B. Sinus arrhythmia
   C. Sinus bradycardia
   D. Junctional escape rhythm

19. A patient develops sinus bradycardia. Which symptoms indicate that his cardiac output is falling?
   A. Hypertension and further drop in heart rate
   B. Hypotension and dizziness
   C. Increased urine output and syncope
   D. Warm, dry skin and hypotension

20. A patient admitted 2 days ago with an acute MI suddenly develops premature atrial contractions (PACs). What's the most likely cause of this arrhythmia in this patient?
   A. Increased caffeine intake
   B. Impending cardiogenic shock
   C. Developing heart failure
   D. Imminent cardiac arrest
21. A patient diagnosed with heart failure is admitted to your telemetry unit. He complains of seeing yellow-green halos around visual images. He also states that he’s been nauseated and unable to eat for the past few days. Based on these findings you suspect:
   A. digoxin toxicity.
   B. atrial fibrillation.
   C. worsening heart failure.
   D. MI.

22. A patient returns to your unit after cardiac surgery. As you perform your assessment of the patient, you note that his cardiac monitor shows atrial fibrillation at a rate of 160 beats/minute. The patient suddenly begins complaining of chest pain. Based on these findings, what’s the best treatment?
   A. Digoxin (Lanoxin) administration
   B. Defibrillation
   C. Cardioversion
   D. Flecainide (Tambocor) administration

23. A 32-year-old patient with a history of Wolff-Parkinson-White (WPW) syndrome is admitted to your floor after gallbladder surgery. Which ECG characteristics are typical in a patient with WPW syndrome?
   A. Prolonged PR interval and narrowed QRS complex
   B. Prolonged PR interval and presence of a delta wave
   C. Shortened PR interval and narrowed QRS complex
   D. Widened QRS complex and presence of a delta wave

24. A 68-year-old patient with a history of heart failure is receiving digoxin (Lanoxin). At the beginning of your shift, you record the patient’s rhythm strip shown below. You interpret this rhythm as:
   A. junctional tachycardia.
   B. wandering pacemaker.
   C. accelerated junctional rhythm.
   D. sinus tachycardia.
25. A patient with a history of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease is admitted to your floor with hypoxemia. You begin cardiac monitoring, which reveals the rhythm shown below. You interpret this rhythm as:
   A. premature junctional contractions.
   B. wandering pacemaker.
   C. accelerated junctional rhythm.
   D. premature atrial contractions.

26. A patient is admitted to your unit with digoxin toxicity. You record a rhythm strip and note that the rhythm is regular, the rate is 80 beats/minute, and the P waves are inverted in lead II and occur before each QRS complex. Based on these findings, you interpret the rhythm as:
   A. accelerated junctional rhythm.
   B. junctional tachycardia.
   C. junctional escape rhythm.
   D. paroxysmal atrial tachycardia.

27. A patient with an acute MI develops an arrhythmia. You record the rhythm strip shown below and identify the arrhythmia as:
   A. idioventricular rhythm.
   B. junctional escape rhythm.
   C. premature junctional contractions.
   D. sinus bradycardia.

28. The same patient with the arrhythmia identified in question 27 is hypotensive. You must immediately administer which agent to increase his heart rate?
   A. Lidocaine
   B. Isoproterenol (Isuprel)
   C. Atropine
   D. Amiodarone (Cordarone)
29. A patient with a low magnesium level develops an arrhythmia. You record the rhythm strip shown below and identify the arrhythmia as:
   A. monomorphic ventricular tachycardia.
   B. ventricular fibrillation.
   C. paroxysmal supraventricular tachycardia.
   D. torsades de pointes.

30. A patient with an acute anterior wall MI develops third-degree heart block. His blood pressure is 78/44 mm Hg, and he’s complaining of dizziness. You should immediately administer atropine and:
   A. follow with a dose of isoproterenol (Isuprel).
   B. apply a transcutaneous pacemaker.
   C. place the patient in Trendelenburg’s position.
   D. prepare for synchronized cardioversion.

31. An 86-year-old patient is found in his apartment without heat on a cold winter day. He’s admitted to your unit with hypothermia. You begin cardiac monitoring, which displays the rhythm shown below. You document this strip as:
   A. normal sinus rhythm with first-degree AV block.
   B. type 1 second-degree AV block.
   C. sinus tachycardia.
   D. junctional tachycardia.
32. You’re caring for a patient who developed complications after an acute MI requiring transvenous pacemaker insertion. His monitor alarm sounds and the rhythm strip shown below is recorded. You interpret this rhythm as which type of pacemaker malfunction?
   A. Failure to capture
   B. Failure to pace
   C. Undersensing
   D. Oversensing

33. A patient admitted to the cardiac care unit with digoxin toxicity required transvenous pacemaker insertion. While assessing the patient, you note the rhythm shown below on the patient’s monitor. This rhythm strip displays:
   A. oversensing.
   B. failure to sense.
   C. failure to pace.
   D. undersensing.

34. Your patient complains that his heart is skipping beats. You immediately record a rhythm strip from his cardiac monitor and take his vital signs. Based on the rhythm strip shown below, you should notify the practitioner of:
   A. failure to sense.
   B. oversensing.
   C. pacemaker-mediated tachycardia.
   D. failure to pace.
35. When teaching a patient with a newly inserted permanent pacemaker, you should:
   A. advise him to avoid computed tomography scans.
   B. tell him that hiccups are normal for the first few days after pacemaker insertion.
   C. instruct him to avoid tight clothing.
   D. explain that magnetic resonance imaging scans are safe.

36. You’re caring for a 75-year-old patient who’s receiving oral procainamide to control supraventricular tachycardia. Before discharge, you should instruct the patient:
   A. to avoid chewing the drug, which may cause him to get too much of the drug at once.
   B. that lupus-like symptoms are normal and will cease 2 to 3 weeks after initiation of therapy.
   C. that a bitter taste is common.
   D. that he may crush the extended-release tablet if it’s difficult to swallow.

37. A patient returns to your floor from the postanesthesia care unit after undergoing a right lower lobectomy. When you begin cardiac monitoring, you note the rhythm strip shown below. Which drug will the practitioner most likely prescribe to rapidly convert this rhythm?
   A. Propafenone (Rhythmol)
   B. Tocainide (Tonocard)
   C. Procainamide
   D. Ibutilide (Corvert)

38. After receiving quinidine, you note that your patient develops a prolonged QT interval on his rhythm strip. You notify the practitioner immediately because you know that prolongation of the QT interval places the patient at risk for what?
   A. Atrial fibrillation
   B. Junctional tachycardia
   C. Polymorphic ventricular tachycardia
   D. Atrial flutter
39. A 74-year-old patient is admitted to your floor from the ED with syncope. You note the rhythm shown below when you record a rhythm strip from his cardiac monitor. Based on this rhythm strip, you should question an order for which drug on the patient’s chart?
   A. Warfarin (Coumadin)
   B. Verapamil (Calan)
   C. Epinephrine
   D. Atropine

40. A 36-year-old patient with a history of heart transplantation is admitted to your floor for observation after an appendectomy. If the patient develops symptomatic bradycardia, which drug is indicated?
   A. Atropine
   B. Isoproterenol (Isuprel)
   C. Dopamine
   D. Propranolol (Inderal)

41. The surgeon orders a preoperative 12-lead ECG for your patient who’s scheduled for a thoracotomy in the morning. Using your knowledge of 12-lead ECGs, which leads are bipolar?
   A. aVR, aVL, and aVF
   B. I, II, and III
   C. V1, V2, and V3
   D. V4, V5, and V6

42. Each of the 12 leads of an ECG views the heart from a different angle. Lead I views which area of the heart?
   A. Inferior wall
   B. Anterior wall
   C. Posterior wall
   D. Lateral wall
43. The practitioner orders a signal-averaged ECG for a patient who sustained an acute MI. Why is this test typically ordered?
   A. To locate posterior wall damage
   B. To identify whether the patient is at risk for sudden death from sustained ventricular tachycardia
   C. To identify whether the patient has suffered damage to his right ventricle
   D. To identify left bundle-branch block in an anterior wall MI

44. You’re caring for a patient with a history of angina who calls you into his room because he’s experiencing chest pain. His admission orders included a 12-lead ECG with each episode of chest pain. You immediately retrieve the ECG machine. To ensure proper placement, where should you place lead V₁?
   A. Over the fourth intercostal space at the right sternal border
   B. Over the fourth intercostal space at the left sternal border
   C. Over the fifth intercostal space at the left anterior axillary line
   D. Over the fifth intercostal space at the left midclavicular line

45. A 12-lead ECG is ordered for a 32-year-old patient who comes to the ED complaining of chest pain. You know that a 12-lead ECG is necessary to assess conduction of the:
   A. right ventricle.
   B. right and left ventricles.
   C. left ventricle.
   D. right and left atria.

46. You’re caring for a 72-year-old patient admitted with unstable angina. He calls you into his room and complains of chest pain that he rates an 8 on a scale of 0 to 10 (10 being the worst). You immediately obtain a 12-lead ECG. Which ECG change would you expect with angina?
   A. Pathologic Q wave
   B. T-wave inversion
   C. Widened QRS complex
   D. Poor R wave progression

47. A patient’s 12-lead ECG reveals left axis deviation. When is left axis deviation considered normal?
   A. In infants
   B. In small children
   C. In pregnant women
   D. In healthy adults
48. A 38-year-old patient is admitted with a diagnosis of unstable angina. Which statement is true about unstable angina?
   A. The pain is typically triggered by exertion or stress.
   B. The pain is typically relieved by rest.
   C. The pain typically lasts less than 2 minutes.
   D. The pain may occur while the patient is sleeping.

49. After experiencing substernal chest pain for about 4 hours, a patient drives himself to the ED. He’s triaged immediately and a 12-lead ECG is obtained. Which change on the patient’s ECG is associated with myocardial necrosis?
   A. Pathologic Q waves
   B. T-wave inversion
   C. ST-segment elevation
   D. Narrowed QRS complex

50. When examining your patient’s 12-lead ECG, you notice a bundle-branch block. Which leads should you check to determine whether the block is in the right or left bundle?
   A. V₁ and V₆
   B. II and aV₆
   C. V₄ and V₅
   D. I and III

51. You obtain a telemetry strip on a patient after coronary artery bypass surgery. After interpreting the rhythm strip shown below, what arrhythmia should you document?
   A. Atrial flutter
   B. Type II second-degree AV block
   C. Sinus arrhythmia
   D. Third-degree AV block

52. You’re caring for a patient with an evolving anterolateral wall MI. While examining the patient’s 12-lead ECG, you would expect to note changes in which leads? (Select all that apply.)
   A. Lead I
   B. Lead III
   C. Lead aV₆
   D. Lead V₄
   E. Lead V₆
53. As part of a preoperative assessment, you begin preparation for a 12-lead ECG. Using the figure below, identify the area on the patient’s chest where you would place lead V₁.

![Diagram of chest and ECG leads]

54. While interpreting the rhythm strip shown below for a patient who was just admitted to the telemetry unit, you document the PR interval as how many seconds?

__________ seconds

![Rhythm strip image]
**Answers**

1. A. The bicuspid valve, commonly called the *mitral valve* is located between the left atrium and left ventricle.

2. B. The circumflex artery supplies oxygenated blood to the lateral walls of the ventricle, the left atrium, and the left posterior fasciculus of the left bundle branch.

3. B. The vagus nerve carries impulses that slow the heart rate and the conduction of impulses through the AV node and ventricles.

4. B. Polarization describes cardiac cells at rest.

5. D. If the Purkinje fibers take over as the heart’s pacemaker, impulses are typically discharged at a rate of 20 to 40 beats per minute.

6. D. Lead MCL₁ is the equivalent to V₁ on a 12-lead ECG.

7. A. The six limb leads—leads I, II, III, aVR, aVL, and aVF—provide information about the heart’s frontal plane.

8. A. Before initiating cardiac monitoring, you must first prepare the patient’s skin. Use a special rough patch on the back of the electrode, a dry washcloth, or a gauze pad to briskly rub each site until the skin reddens.

9. A. Electrical interference appears on the ECG as a baseline that’s thick and unreadable. Electrical interference is caused by electrical power leakage. It may also occur due to interference from other equipment in the room or improperly grounded equipment.

10. B. The horizontal axis of the ECG strip represents time.

11. C. Using the 8-step method of rhythm strip interpretation, you should check the rhythm first and then calculate the rate. Next, evaluate the P wave, check out the PR interval and the QRS complex, examine the T wave, measure the QT interval and, finally, check for ectopic beats and other abnormalities.

12. B. A change in the ST segment may indicate myocardial damage. An ST segment may become either elevated or depressed.

13. A. A U wave isn’t present on every rhythm strip. A prominent U wave may be due to hypokalemia, hypercalcemia, or digoxin toxicity.

14. A. Although you can use the 10-times method, the 1,500 method, or the sequence method to determine heart rate, you shouldn’t rely on these methods. Always check a pulse to correlate it with the heart rate on the ECG.
15. B. The normal duration of a PR interval is 0.12 to 0.20 second.
16. D. Atropine or epinephrine may be administered for symptomatic bradycardia that’s caused by sick sinus syndrome. Therefore, you should keep these drugs readily available.
17. B. Sinus tachycardia occurs in about 30% of patients after acute MI and is considered a poor prognostic sign because it may be associated with massive heart damage.
18. B. The rhythm strip shows sinus arrhythmia. If sinus arrhythmia develops suddenly in the patient taking digoxin, the patient may be experiencing digoxin toxicity.
19. B. When sinus bradycardia is symptomatic, the resulting drop in cardiac output produces such signs and symptoms as hypotension and dizziness.
20. C. In a patient with an acute MI, PACs can serve as an early sign of heart failure or an electrolyte imbalance.
21. A. The patient with digoxin toxicity may develop arrhythmias, blurred vision, hypotension, increased severity of heart failure, yellow-green halos around visual images, anorexia, nausea, and vomiting.
22. C. If the patient with atrial fibrillation complains of chest pain, emergency measures such as cardioversion are necessary. Digoxin may be used to control the ventricular response in patients with atrial fibrillation who are asymptomatic.
23. D. WPW syndrome causes a shortened PR interval (less than 0.10 second) and a widened QRS complex (greater than 0.10 second). The beginning of the QRS complex may appear slurred. This hallmark sign is referred to as a delta wave.
24. A. The rhythm strip reveals junctional tachycardia. The rhythm is regular, the rate is 110 beats/minute, a P wave occurs after each QRS complex, and the PR interval isn’t measurable.
25. B. The rhythm strip reveals a wandering pacemaker. The key characteristics are the varying shapes of the P waves.
26. A. Based on these findings, the patient’s rhythm strip reveals accelerated junctional rhythm.
27. A. The rhythm strip reveals idioventricular rhythm.
28. C. The agent of choice for treatment of idioventricular rhythm is atropine. A pacemaker may be necessary after atropine administration.
29. D. The rhythm strip shows torsades de pointes.
30. B. If the patient’s cardiac output is inadequate (low blood pressure and dizziness), you should immediately administer atropine and apply a transcutaneous pacemaker. The patient may need a transvenous pacemaker until the block resolves. If the block doesn’t resolve, he’ll need a permanent pacemaker.

31. A. You should document in your notes that the patient’s monitor reveals normal sinus rhythm with first-degree AV block. Hypothermia is one cause of this arrhythmia.

32. A. The rhythm strip shows the pacemaker’s failure to capture. The ECG pacemaker spike isn’t followed by a QRS complex.

33. C. The rhythm strip reveals the pacemaker’s failure to pace. After two paced beats, there’s no apparent pacemaker activity on the ECG.

34. A. The ECG pacemaker spikes fall where they shouldn’t, indicating a failure to sense.

35. C. You should instruct the patient to avoid tight clothing or direct pressure over the pulse generator, to avoid magnetic resonance imaging scans and certain other diagnostic studies, and to notify the practitioner if he feels confused, light-headed, or short of breath. The patient should also notify the practitioner if he has palpitations, hiccups, or a rapid or unusually slow heart rate.

36. A. Warn the patient taking oral procainamide not to chew it because this might cause him to get too much of the drug at once. Lupus-like symptoms are associated with long-term use of procainamide and may require discontinuation of the drug. A bitter taste is also an adverse effect of procainamide. The extended-release tablet shouldn’t be crushed.

37. D. This rhythm strip reveals atrial fibrillation. Ibutilide is used for rapid conversion of recent-onset atrial fibrillation or flutter to sinus rhythm.

38. C. Prolongation of the QT interval is a sign that the patient is predisposed to developing polymorphic ventricular tachycardia.

39. B. The rhythm strip reveals sick sinus syndrome. Verapamil should be avoided in sick sinus syndrome or second- or third-degree AV block without a pacemaker and in atrial fibrillation or flutter due to WPW syndrome.

40. B. Isoproterenol is the drug of choice for treating symptomatic bradycardia in patients who have undergone heart transplantation. The vagal nerve dissection that occurs during heart transplantation surgery renders atropine ineffective in these patients.
41. B. The 12 leads include three bipolar limb leads (I, II, and III), three unipolar augmented limb leads (aVR, aVL, and aVF) and six unipolar precordial leads (V1, V2, V3, V4, V5, and V6).

42. D. Lead I views the lateral wall of the heart.

43. B. Signal-averaged ECG helps identify patients at risk for sudden death from sustained ventricular tachycardia. The test uses a computer to identify late electrical potentials that can’t be detected by a 12-lead ECG.

44. A. Lead V1 should be placed over the fourth intercostal space at the right sternal border.

45. C. A 12-lead ECG is used to assess left ventricular conduction activity. A right-sided ECG is necessary to assess right ventricular conduction activity.

46. B. Classic ECG changes associated with angina include a peaked T wave, flattened T wave, T-wave inversion, ST-segment depression with T-wave inversion, and ST-segment depression without T-wave inversion.

47. C. Left axis deviation is a normal finding in pregnant women. Right axis deviation is normal in infants and small children.

48. D. Unstable angina is more easily provoked and may occur while the patient is sleeping, causing him to awaken. It’s also unpredictable and tends to worsen over time. In stable angina, pain is triggered by exertion or stress and is commonly relieved by rest. Each episode follows a similar pattern.

49. A. The area of myocardial necrosis is called the zone of infarction. The ECG change associated with a necrotic area is a pathologic Q wave. The zone of injury shows up on an ECG as an elevated ST segment. The zone of ischemia is represented by T-wave inversion.

50. A. After you identify a bundle-branch block, examine lead V1, which lies to the right of the heart, and lead V6, which lies to the left of the heart. These leads will tell you if the block is in the right or left bundle.

51. D. The rhythm strip reveals third-degree AV block. Characteristics of this arrhythmia include a regular atrial rhythm along with a regular but slow ventricular rhythm, an absence of a relationship between P waves and QRS complexes, and P and R waves that march across the strip in rhythm.
52. A, D, E. In an anterolateral wall MI, ECG changes occur in leads I, aVL, V4, V5, and V6.

53. Lead V1 should be placed over the fourth intercostal space at the right sternal border.

54. 0.14. The PR interval is measured from the beginning of the P wave to the beginning of the QRS complex. The normal duration of the PR interval is 0.12 to 0.20 second.
Pulseless arrest

1. **Pulseless arrest**
   - Basic life support algorithm; call for help and give CPR.
   - Give oxygen when available.
   - Attach monitor/defibrillator when available.

2. **Check rhythm.**
   - **Shockable rhythm?**

3. **Ventricular fibrillation or ventricular tachycardia**
   - Give one shock.
   - Manual biphasic: device specific (typically 120 to 200 joules)
   - Automated external defibrillator (AED): device-specific
   - Monophasic: 360 joules
   - Resume CPR immediately after the shock.

4. **Check rhythm.**
   - **Shockable rhythm?**

5. **Shockable**
   - Give five cycles of CPR.*

6. **Continue CPR while defibrillator is charging.**
   - Give one shock.
     - Manual biphasic: device specific (same as first shock or higher dose)
     - AED: device specific
     - Monophasic: 360 joules
     - Resume CPR immediately after the shock.
   - When I.V./I.O. available, give vasopressor during CPR (before or after the shock)
     - Epinephrine I.V./I.O.
     - Repeat every 3 to 5 minutes.
     - May give 1 dose of vasopressin 40 units I.V./I.O. to replace first or second dose of epinephrine.

7. **Check rhythm.**
   - **Shockable rhythm?**

8. **Continue CPR while defibrillator is charging.**
   - Give one shock.
     - Manual biphasic: device specific (same as first shock or higher dose)
     - AED: device specific
     - Monophasic: 360 joules
     - Resume CPR immediately after the shock.
   - Consider antiarrhythmics; give during CPR (before or after the shock)
     - Amiodarone (300 mg I.V./I.O. once, then consider additional 150 mg I.V./I.O. once)
     - Lidocaine (1 to 1.5 mg/kg first dose, then 0.5 to 0.75 mg/kg I.V./I.O.; maximum three doses or 3 mg/kg).
     - Consider magnesium, loading dose 1 to 2 g I.V./I.O. for torsades de pointes.
     - After five cycles of CPR,* go to Box 5.
Asystole or pulseless electrical activity (PEA)

Resume CPR immediately for five cycles. When I.V./I.O. available, give vasopressor

- epinephrine 1 mg I.V./I.O.
  Repeat every 3 to 5 minutes.
  or
- May give 1 dose of vasopressin 40 units I.V./I.O. to replace first or second dose of epinephrine.
Consider atropine 1 mg I.V./I.O. for asystole of slow PEA rate; repeat every 3 to 5 minutes (up to three doses).

Check rhythm.

- If asystole, go to Box 10.
- If electrical activity, check pulse. If no pulse, go to Box 10.
- If pulse present, begin postresuscitation care.

During CPR

- Push hard and fast (100/minute).
- Ensure full chest recoil.
- Minimize interruptions in chest compressions.
- One cycle of CPR: 30 compressions then 2 breaths; five cycles = 2 minutes.
- Avoid hyperventilation.
- Secure airway and confirm placement.
- Rotate compressors every two minutes with rhythm checks.
- Search for and treat possible contributing factors, such as:
  - hypovolemia
  - hypoxia
  - hydrogen ion (acidosis)
  - hypokalemia/hyperkalemia
  - hypoglycemia
  - hypothermia
  - toxins
  - tamponade, cardiac
  - tension pneumothorax
  - thrombosis (coronary or pulmonary)
  - trauma.

* After an advanced airway is placed, rescuers no longer deliver “cycles” of CPR. Give continuous chest compressions without pauses for breaths. Give 8 to 10 breaths/minute. Check rhythm every 2 minutes.

Bradycardia

Heart rate < 60 beats/minute and inadequate for clinical condition

Maintain patent airway; assist breathing as needed.
- Give oxygen.
- Monitor ECG (identify rhythm), blood pressure, oximetry.
- Establish I.V. access.

Signs or symptoms of poor perfusion caused by the bradycardia?
(For example, acute altered mental status, ongoing chest pain, hypotension, or other signs of shock.)

Reminders
- If pulseless arrest develops, go to Pulseless Arrest Algorithm.
- Search for and treat possible contributing factors, such as:
  - hypovolemia
  - hypoxia
  - hydrogen ion (acidosis)
  - hypokalemia/hyperkalemia
  - hypoglycemia
  - hypothermia
  - toxins
  - tamponade, cardiac
  - tension pneumothorax
  - thrombosis (coronary or pulmonary)
  - trauma (hypovolemia, increased ICP).
Poor perfusion

4 • Prepare for transcutaneous pacing; use without delay for high-degree block (type II second-degree block or third-degree atrioventricular block).
• Consider atropine 0.5 mg I.V. while awaiting pacer. May repeat to a total dose of 3 mg. If ineffective, begin pacing.
• Consider epinephrine (2 to 10 mcg/minute) or dopamine (2 to 10 mcg/kg/minute) infusion while awaiting pacer or if pacing ineffective.

5 • Prepare for transvenous pacing.
• Treat contributing causes.
• Consider expert consultation.
Tachycardia

1. Tachycardia with pulses
- Assess and support ABCs as needed.
- Give oxygen.
- Monitor ECG (identify rhythm), blood pressure, oximetry.
- Identify and treat reversible causes.

2. Symptom persist
3. Is patient stable?
   - Unstable signs include altered mental status, ongoing chest pain, hypotension, or other signs of shock.
   - Note: Rate-related symptoms uncommon if heart rate < 150/minute.

4. Narrow
   - Establish I.V. access.
   - Obtain 12-lead ECG (when available) or rhythm strip.
   - Is QRS interval narrow (< 0.12 second)?

5. Narrow QRS*
   - Is rhythm regular?
   - Attempt vagal maneuvers.
   - Give adenosine 6 mg rapid I.V. push. If no conversion, give 12 mg rapid I.V. push; may repeat 12 mg dose once.

6. Irregular narrow-complex tachycardia
   - Probable atrial fibrillation or possible atrial flutter or multifocal atrial tachycardia.
   - Consider expert consultation.
   - Control rate (for example, diltiazem, beta blockers; use beta blockers with caution in pulmonary disease or heart failure).

7. Does rhythm convert?
   - Note: Consider expert consultation.

8. Convert
   - If rhythm converts, probable reentry supraventricular tachycardia (SVT):
     - Observe for recurrence.
     - Treat recurrence with adenosine or longer-acting atrioventricular (AV) nodal blocking drugs, such as diltiazem and beta blockers.

9. Irregular narrow-complex tachycardia
   - Suspect atrial flutter, ectopic atrial tachycardia, or junctional tachycardia.
   - Control rate (for example, diltiazem, beta blockers; use beta blockers with caution in pulmonary disease or heart failure).
   - Treat underlying cause.
   - Consider expert consultation.
During evaluation
- Secure, verify airway and vascular access when possible.
- Consider expert consultation.
- Prepare for cardioversion.
- Treat contributing factors, such as:
  - hypovolemia
  - hypoxia
  - hydrogen ion (acidosis)
  - hypokalemia/hyperkalemia
  - hypoglycemia
  - hypothermia
  - toxins
  - tamponade, cardiac
  - tension pneumothorax
  - thrombosis (coronary or pulmonary)
  - trauma (hypovolemia).

*Note: If patient becomes unstable, go to Box 4.
Brushing up on interpretation skills

Use these sample rhythm strips as a practical way to brush up on your ECG interpretation skills. Record the rhythm, rates, and waveform characteristics in the blank spaces provided, and then compare your findings with the answers beginning on page 329.

1.

Atrial rhythm: ________________  QRS complex: ________________
Ventricular rhythm: ________________  T wave: ________________
Atrial rate: ________________  QT interval: ________________
Ventricular rate: ________________  Other: ________________
P wave: ________________  Interpretation: ________________
PR interval: ________________

2.

Atrial rhythm: ________________  QRS complex: ________________
Ventricular rhythm: ________________  T wave: ________________
Atrial rate: ________________  QT interval: ________________
Ventricular rate: ________________  Other: ________________
P wave: ________________  Interpretation: ________________
PR interval: ________________
3.

Atrial rhythm: ________________ QRS complex: ________________
Ventricular rhythm: ________________ T wave: ________________
Atrial rate: ________________ QT interval: ________________
Ventricular rate: ________________ Other: ________________
P wave: ________________ Interpretation: ________________
PR interval: ________________

4.

Atrial rhythm: ________________ QRS complex: ________________
Ventricular rhythm: ________________ T wave: ________________
Atrial rate: ________________ QT interval: ________________
Ventricular rate: ________________ Other: ________________
P wave: ________________ Interpretation: ________________
PR interval: ________________

5.

Atrial rhythm: ________________ QRS complex: ________________
Ventricular rhythm: ________________ T wave: ________________
Atrial rate: ________________ QT interval: ________________
Ventricular rate: ________________ Other: ________________
P wave: ________________ Interpretation: ________________
PR interval: ________________
6. atrial rhythm: _______________ qrs complex: _______________
ventricular rhythm: _______________
atrial rate: _______________
ventricular rate: _______________
p wave: _______________
pr interval: _______________
interpretation: _______________
t wave: _______________
qt interval: _______________
other: _______________

7. atrial rhythm: _______________ qrs complex: _______________
ventricular rhythm: _______________
atrial rate: _______________
ventricular rate: _______________
p wave: _______________
pr interval: _______________
interpretation: _______________
t wave: _______________
qt interval: _______________
other: _______________

8. atrial rhythm: _______________ qrs complex: _______________
ventricular rhythm: _______________
atrial rate: _______________
ventricular rate: _______________
p wave: _______________
pr interval: _______________
interpretation: _______________
t wave: _______________
qt interval: _______________
other: _______________
9. 

Atrial rhythm: ________________  QRS complex: ________________  
Ventricular rhythm: ___________  T wave: ___________________  
Atrial rate: ___________________  QT interval: ____________________  
Ventricular rate: ______________  Other: ______________________  
P wave: ______________________  Interpretation: ________________  
PR interval: __________________  ________________________________

10. 

Atrial rhythm: ________________  QRS complex: ________________  
Ventricular rhythm: ___________  T wave: ___________________  
Atrial rate: ___________________  QT interval: ____________________  
Ventricular rate: ______________  Other: ______________________  
P wave: ______________________  Interpretation: ________________  
PR interval: __________________  ________________________________

11. 

Atrial rhythm: ________________  QRS complex: ________________  
Ventricular rhythm: ___________  T wave: ___________________  
Atrial rate: ___________________  QT interval: ____________________  
Ventricular rate: ______________  Other: ______________________  
P wave: ______________________  Interpretation: ________________  
PR interval: __________________  ________________________________
12.
Atrial rhythm: ________________  QRS complex: ________________
Ventricular rhythm: ___________  T wave: ____________________
Atrial rate: ________________   QT interval: __________________
Ventricular rate: ______________  Other: ____________________
P wave: ____________________  Interpretation: ________________
PR interval: ________________  _____________________________

13.
Atrial rhythm: ________________  QRS complex: ________________
Ventricular rhythm: ___________  T wave: ____________________
Atrial rate: ________________   QT interval: __________________
Ventricular rate: ______________  Other: ____________________
P wave: ____________________  Interpretation: ________________
PR interval: ________________  _____________________________

14.
Atrial rhythm: ________________  QRS complex: ________________
Ventricular rhythm: ___________  T wave: ____________________
Atrial rate: ________________   QT interval: __________________
Ventricular rate: ______________  Other: ____________________
P wave: ____________________  Interpretation: ________________
PR interval: ________________  _____________________________
15.

Atrial rhythm: ________________
Ventricular rhythm: ________________
Atrial rate: ___________________
Ventricular rate: ________________
P wave: ______________________
PR interval: __________________
QRS complex: ________________
T wave: ______________________
QT interval: __________________
Other: _______________________
Interpretation: ________________

16.

Atrial rhythm: ________________
Ventricular rhythm: ________________
Atrial rate: ___________________
Ventricular rate: ________________
P wave: ______________________
PR interval: __________________
QRS complex: ________________
T wave: ______________________
QT interval: __________________
Other: _______________________
Interpretation: ________________

17.

Atrial rhythm: ________________
Ventricular rhythm: ________________
Atrial rate: ___________________
Ventricular rate: ________________
P wave: ______________________
PR interval: __________________
QRS complex: ________________
T wave: ______________________
QT interval: __________________
Other: _______________________
Interpretation: ________________
18.

Atrial rhythm: ________________  QRS complex: ________________
Ventricular rhythm: ___________  T wave: ________________
Atrial rate: ________________  QT interval: ________________
Ventricular rate: ________________  Other: ________________
P wave: ________________  Interpretation: ________________
PR interval: ________________

19.

Atrial rhythm: ________________  QRS complex: ________________
Ventricular rhythm: ___________  T wave: ________________
Atrial rate: ________________  QT interval: ________________
Ventricular rate: ________________  Other: ________________
P wave: ________________  Interpretation: ________________
PR interval: ________________

20.

Atrial rhythm: ________________  QRS complex: ________________
Ventricular rhythm: ___________  T wave: ________________
Atrial rate: ________________  QT interval: ________________
Ventricular rate: ________________  Other: ________________
P wave: ________________  Interpretation: ________________
PR interval: ________________
21.

Atrial rhythm: ________________  QRS complex: ________________
Ventricular rhythm: ___________  T wave: ________________
Atrial rate: ________________  QT interval: ________________
Ventricular rate: ________________  Other: ________________
P wave: ________________  Interpretation: ________________
PR interval: ________________

22.

Atrial rhythm: ________________  QRS complex: ________________
Ventricular rhythm: ___________  T wave: ________________
Atrial rate: ________________  QT interval: ________________
Ventricular rate: ________________  Other: ________________
P wave: ________________  Interpretation: ________________
PR interval: ________________

23.

Atrial rhythm: ________________  QRS complex: ________________
Ventricular rhythm: ___________  T wave: ________________
Atrial rate: ________________  QT interval: ________________
Ventricular rate: ________________  Other: ________________
P wave: ________________  Interpretation: ________________
PR interval: ________________
24.

Atrial rhythm: ________________ QRS complex: ________________
Ventricular rhythm: ________________ T wave: ________________
Atrial rate: ________________ QT interval: ________________
Ventricular rate: ________________ Other: ________________
P wave: ________________ Interpretation: ________________
PR interval: ________________

25.

Atrial rhythm: ________________ QRS complex: ________________
Ventricular rhythm: ________________ T wave: ________________
Atrial rate: ________________ QT interval: ________________
Ventricular rate: ________________ Other: ________________
P wave: ________________ Interpretation: ________________
PR interval: ________________

26.

Atrial rhythm: ________________ QRS complex: ________________
Ventricular rhythm: ________________ T wave: ________________
Atrial rate: ________________ QT interval: ________________
Ventricular rate: ________________ Other: ________________
P wave: ________________ Interpretation: ________________
PR interval: ________________
27.

[Image of an ECG tracing]

Atrial rhythm: ________________ QRS complex: ________________
Ventricular rhythm: ________________ T wave: ________________
Atrial rate: ________________ QT interval: ________________
Ventricular rate: ________________ Other: ________________
P wave: ________________ Interpretation: ________________
PR interval: ________________

28.

[Image of an ECG tracing]

Atrial rhythm: ________________ QRS complex: ________________
Ventricular rhythm: ________________ T wave: ________________
Atrial rate: ________________ QT interval: ________________
Ventricular rate: ________________ Other: ________________
P wave: ________________ Interpretation: ________________
PR interval: ________________

29.

[Image of an ECG tracing]

Atrial rhythm: ________________ QRS complex: ________________
Ventricular rhythm: ________________ T wave: ________________
Atrial rate: ________________ QT interval: ________________
Ventricular rate: ________________ Other: ________________
P wave: ________________ Interpretation: ________________
PR interval: ________________
30.

Atrial rhythm: ________________  QRS complex: ________________
Ventricular rhythm: ___________  T wave: ____________________
Atrial rate: ___________________  QT interval: __________________
Ventricular rate: ______________  Other: _____________________
P wave: ______________________  Interpretation: ________________
PR interval: __________________  _____________________________

31.

Atrial rhythm: ________________  QRS complex: ________________
Ventricular rhythm: ___________  T wave: ____________________
Atrial rate: ___________________  QT interval: __________________
Ventricular rate: ______________  Other: _____________________
P wave: ______________________  Interpretation: ________________
PR interval: __________________  _____________________________

32.

Atrial rhythm: ________________  QRS complex: ________________
Ventricular rhythm: ___________  T wave: ____________________
Atrial rate: ___________________  QT interval: __________________
Ventricular rate: ______________  Other: _____________________
P wave: ______________________  Interpretation: ________________
PR interval: __________________  _____________________________
33.

Atrial rhythm: ________________ QRS complex: ________________
Ventricular rhythm: ___________ T wave: ____________________
Atrial rate: ___________________ QT interval: ________________
Ventricular rate: ___________ Other: ______________________
P wave: ______________________ Interpretation: ________________
PR interval: __________________

34.

Atrial rhythm: ________________ QRS complex: ________________
Ventricular rhythm: ___________ T wave: ____________________
Atrial rate: ___________________ QT interval: ________________
Ventricular rate: ___________ Other: ______________________
P wave: ______________________ Interpretation: ________________
PR interval: __________________

35.

Atrial rhythm: ________________ QRS complex: ________________
Ventricular rhythm: ___________ T wave: ____________________
Atrial rate: ___________________ QT interval: ________________
Ventricular rate: ___________ Other: ______________________
P wave: ______________________ Interpretation: ________________
PR interval: __________________
36.

Atrial rhythm: ________________ QRS complex: ________________
Ventricular rhythm: ________________ T wave: ________________
Atrial rate: ________________ QT interval: ________________
Ventricular rate: ________________ Other: ________________
P wave: ________________ Interpretation: ________________
PR interval: ________________

37.

Atrial rhythm: ________________ QRS complex: ________________
Ventricular rhythm: ________________ T wave: ________________
Atrial rate: ________________ QT interval: ________________
Ventricular rate: ________________ Other: ________________
P wave: ________________ Interpretation: ________________
PR interval: ________________

38.

Atrial rhythm: ________________ QRS complex: ________________
Ventricular rhythm: ________________ T wave: ________________
Atrial rate: ________________ QT interval: ________________
Ventricular rate: ________________ Other: ________________
P wave: ________________ Interpretation: ________________
PR interval: ________________
39.

Atrial rhythm: ________________ QRS complex: ________________
Ventricular rhythm: ___________ T wave: ______________________
Atrial rate: _________________ QT interval: __________________
Ventricular rate: ___________ Other: _______________________
P wave: ____________________ Interpretation: ________________
PR interval: __________________

40.

Atrial rhythm: ________________ QRS complex: ________________
Ventricular rhythm: ___________ T wave: ______________________
Atrial rate: _________________ QT interval: __________________
Ventricular rate: ___________ Other: _______________________
P wave: ____________________ Interpretation: ________________
PR interval: __________________

41.

Atrial rhythm: ________________ QRS complex: ________________
Ventricular rhythm: ___________ T wave: ______________________
Atrial rate: _________________ QT interval: __________________
Ventricular rate: ___________ Other: _______________________
P wave: ____________________ Interpretation: ________________
PR interval: __________________
42.

<table>
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43.

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44.

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<td>PR interval:</td>
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45.

Atrial rhythm: ________________  QRS complex: ________________
Ventricular rhythm: ___________  T wave: ______________________
Atrial rate: ___________________  QT interval: __________________
Ventricular rate: ______________  Other: _______________________
P wave: ______________________  Interpretation: ________________
PR interval: ________________  _____________________________

46.

Atrial rhythm: ________________  QRS complex: ________________
Ventricular rhythm: ___________  T wave: ______________________
Atrial rate: ___________________  QT interval: __________________
Ventricular rate: ______________  Other: _______________________
P wave: ______________________  Interpretation: ________________
PR interval: ________________  _____________________________

47.

Atrial rhythm: ________________  QRS complex: ________________
Ventricular rhythm: ___________  T wave: ______________________
Atrial rate: ___________________  QT interval: __________________
Ventricular rate: ______________  Other: _______________________
P wave: ______________________  Interpretation: ________________
PR interval: ________________  _____________________________
48.

Atrial rhythm: ___________ QRS complex: ______________
Ventricular rhythm: ___________ T wave: ______________
Atrial rate: _______________ QT interval: ______________
Ventricular rate: ______________ Other: ______________
P wave: _______________ Interpretation: ______________
PR interval: _______________

49.

Atrial rhythm: ___________ QRS complex: ______________
Ventricular rhythm: ___________ T wave: ______________
Atrial rate: _______________ QT interval: ______________
Ventricular rate: ______________ Other: ______________
P wave: _______________ Interpretation: ______________
PR interval: _______________

50.

Atrial rhythm: ___________ QRS complex: ______________
Ventricular rhythm: ___________ T wave: ______________
Atrial rate: _______________ QT interval: ______________
Ventricular rate: ______________ Other: ______________
P wave: _______________ Interpretation: ______________
PR interval: _______________
51.

Atrial rhythm: ________________  QRS complex: ________________
Ventricular rhythm: ___________  T wave: ______________________
Atrial rate: ___________________  QT interval: __________________
Ventricular rate: ______________  Other: _______________________
P wave: ______________________  Interpretation: ________________
PR interval: __________________

52.

Atrial rhythm: ________________  QRS complex: ________________
Ventricular rhythm: ___________  T wave: ______________________
Atrial rate: ___________________  QT interval: __________________
Ventricular rate: ______________  Other: _______________________
P wave: ______________________  Interpretation: ________________
PR interval: __________________

53.

Atrial rhythm: ________________  QRS complex: ________________
Ventricular rhythm: ___________  T wave: ______________________
Atrial rate: ___________________  QT interval: __________________
Ventricular rate: ______________  Other: _______________________
P wave: ______________________  Interpretation: ________________
PR interval: __________________
54.

Atrial rhythm: ________________  QRS complex: ________________
Ventricular rhythm: ________________  T wave: ________________
Atrial rate: ________________  QT interval: ________________
Ventricular rate: ________________  Other: ________________
P wave: ________________  Interpretation: ________________
PR interval: ________________

55.

Atrial rhythm: ________________  QRS complex: ________________
Ventricular rhythm: ________________  T wave: ________________
Atrial rate: ________________  QT interval: ________________
Ventricular rate: ________________  Other: ________________
P wave: ________________  Interpretation: ________________
PR interval: ________________

56.

Atrial rhythm: ________________  QRS complex: ________________
Ventricular rhythm: ________________  T wave: ________________
Atrial rate: ________________  QT interval: ________________
Ventricular rate: ________________  Other: ________________
P wave: ________________  Interpretation: ________________
PR interval: ________________
**Answers**

1.  
   *Atrial rhythm:* Regular, except for missing PQRST complex  
   *Ventricular rhythm:* Regular, except for missing PQRST complex  
   *Atrial rate:* 40 beats/minute; underlying rate 50 beats/minute  
   *Ventricular rate:* 40 beats/minute  
   *P wave:* Normal size and configuration; absent during pause  
   *PR interval:* 0.20 second  
   *QRS complex:* 0.08 second  
   *T wave:* Normal configuration; absent during pause  
   *QT interval:* 0.40 second  
   *Other:* None  
   *Interpretation:* Sinus arrest

2.  
   *Atrial rhythm:* Irregular  
   *Ventricular rhythm:* Irregular  
   *Atrial rate:* 60 beats/minute; underlying rate 88 beats/minute  
   *Ventricular rate:* 90 beats/minute  
   *P wave:* None with premature ventricular contractions (PVCs); present with QRS complexes  
   *PR interval:* 0.16 second  
   *QRS complex:* Underlying rate 0.08 second; 0.16 second with PVCs  
   *T wave:* Normal configuration; opposite direction with PVCs  
   *QT interval:* 0.42 second  
   *Other:* None  
   *Interpretation:* Normal sinus rhythm with trigeminal PVCs

3.  
   *Atrial rhythm:* Regular  
   *Ventricular rhythm:* Regular  
   *Atrial rate:* 125 beats/minute  
   *Ventricular rate:* 125 beats/minute  
   *P wave:* Normal size and configuration  
   *PR interval:* 0.14 second  
   *QRS complex:* 0.08 second  
   *T wave:* Normal configuration  
   *QT interval:* 0.32 second  
   *Other:* None  
   *Interpretation:* Sinus tachycardia
4.  
Atrial rhythm: Irregular  
Ventricular rhythm: Irregular  
Atrial rate: 60 beats/minute; underlying rate 71 beats/minute  
Ventricular rate: 70 beats/minute  
P wave: None with PVC; present with QRS complexes  
PR interval: 0.16 second  
QRS complex: 0.08 second; 0.14 second with PVC  
T wave: Normal configuration  
QT interval: 0.40 second  
Other: None  
Interpretation: Normal sinus rhythm with PVC

5.  
Atrial rhythm: Irregular  
Ventricular rhythm: Irregular  
Atrial rate: 40 beats/minute; underlying rate 70 beats/minute  
Ventricular rate: 70 beats/minute  
P wave: None with PVCs; present with QRS complexes  
PR interval: 0.16 second  
QRS complex: 0.08 second; 0.16 second with PVCs  
T wave: Normal configuration  
QT interval: 0.40 second  
Other: None  
Interpretation: Normal sinus rhythm with run of PVCs

6.  
Atrial rhythm: Absent  
Ventricular rhythm: Chaotic  
Atrial rate: Absent  
Ventricular rate: Undetermined  
P wave: Absent  
PR interval: Unmeasurable  
QRS complex: Indiscernible  
T wave: Indiscernible  
QT interval: Not applicable  
Other: None  
Interpretation: Ventricular fibrillation
7.

Atrial rhythm: Regular  
Ventricular rhythm: Regular  
Atrial rate: 90 beats/minute; underlying rate 107 beats/minute  
Ventricular rate: 110 beats/minute  
P wave: Present in normal QRS complexes  
PR interval: 0.16 second  
QRS complex: 0.08 second  
T wave: Normal configuration  
QT interval: 0.32 second  
Other: Random pacemaker spikes  
Interpretation: Sinus tachycardia with pacemaker failure to sense

8.

Atrial rhythm: Unmeasurable  
Ventricular rhythm: Regular  
Atrial rate: Unmeasurable  
Ventricular rate: Paced rate 40 beats/minute; pacer fires at 75 beats/minute  
P wave: Absent  
PR interval: Unmeasurable  
QRS complex: Unmeasurable  
T wave: Unmeasurable  
QT interval: Unmeasurable  
Other: None  
Interpretation: Paced rhythm with failure to capture

9.

Atrial rhythm: Irregular  
Ventricular rhythm: Irregular  
Atrial rate: Indiscernible  
Ventricular rate: 80 beats/minute  
P wave: Absent; fine fibrillation waves present  
PR interval: Indiscernible  
QRS complex: 0.08 second  
T wave: Indiscernible  
QT interval: Unmeasurable  
Other: None  
Interpretation: Atrial fibrillation
10. Atrial rhythm: Regular  
Ventricular rhythm: Irregular  
Atrial rate: 50 beats/minute  
Ventricular rate: 40 beats/minute  
P wave: Normal; some not followed by QRS complexes  
PR interval: 0.16 second and constant (may be prolonged)  
QRS complex: 0.08 second  
T wave: 0.16 second  
QT interval: 0.40 second  
Other: None  
Interpretation: Type II second-degree atrioventricular (AV) block

11. Atrial rhythm: Irregular  
Ventricular rhythm: Irregular  
Atrial rate: 60 beats/minute  
Ventricular rate: 70 beats/minute  
P wave: Rate and configuration varies  
PR interval: Varies with rhythm  
QRS complex: 0.10 second  
T wave: Configuration varies  
QT interval: Configuration varies  
Other: None  
Interpretation: Sick sinus syndrome

12. Atrial rhythm: Regular  
Ventricular rhythm: Regular  
Atrial rate: 110 beats/minute  
Ventricular rate: 110 beats/minute  
P wave: Normal size and configuration  
PR interval: 0.16 second  
QRS complex: 0.10 second  
T wave: Normal configuration  
QT interval: 0.36 second  
Other: None  
Interpretation: Sinus tachycardia
13. 
*Atrial rhythm:* Regular  
*Ventricular rhythm:* Regular  
*Atrial rate:* 270 beats/minute  
*Ventricular rate:* 70 beats/minute  
*P wave:* Saw-tooth edged  
*PR interval:* Unmeasurable  
*QRS complex:* 0.10 second  
*T wave:* Unidentifiable  
*QT interval:* Unidentifiable  
*Other:* None  
*Interpretation:* Atrial flutter (4:1 block)

14. 
*Atrial rhythm:* Irregular  
*Ventricular rhythm:* Irregular  
*Atrial rate:* About 110 beats/minute  
*Ventricular rate:* About 110 beats/minute  
*P wave:* Size and configuration vary  
*PR interval:* Rate varies  
*QRS complex:* 0.08 second  
*T wave:* Inverted  
*QT interval:* 0.22 second  
*Other:* None  
*Interpretation:* Multifocal atrial tachycardia

15. 
*Atrial rhythm:* Irregular  
*Ventricular rhythm:* Irregular  
*Atrial rate:* 100 beats/minute  
*Ventricular rate:* 100 beats/minute  
*P wave:* Normal size and configuration, except during premature beat  
*PR interval:* 0.16 second; unmeasurable for premature beat  
*QRS complex:* 0.06 second  
*T wave:* Normal configuration  
*QT interval:* 0.36 second  
*Other:* None  
*Interpretation:* Sinus tachycardia with PVCs
16.  
Atrial rhythm: Unmeasurable  
Ventricular rhythm: Regular  
Atrial rate: Unmeasurable  
Ventricular rate: 187 beats/minute  
P wave: Absent  
PR interval: Unmeasurable  
QRS complex: 0.18 second; wide and bizarre  
T wave: Opposite direction of QRS complex  
QT interval: Unmeasurable  
Other: None  
Interpretation: Ventricular tachycardia (monomorphic)

17.  
Atrial rhythm: Unmeasurable  
Ventricular rhythm: Unmeasurable; fibrillatory waves present  
Atrial rate: Unmeasurable  
Ventricular rate: Unmeasurable  
P wave: Absent  
PR interval: Absent  
QRS complex: Unmeasurable  
T wave: Opposite direction of QRS complex  
QT interval: Absent  
Other: None  
Interpretation: Ventricular fibrillation

18.  
Atrial rhythm: Regular  
Ventricular rhythm: Irregular  
Atrial rate: 75 beats/minute  
Ventricular rate: 50 beats/minute  
P wave: Normal size and configuration  
PR interval: Lengthens with each cycle until dropped  
QRS complex: 0.06 second  
T wave: Normal configuration  
QT interval: 0.38 second  
Other: None  
Interpretation: Type 1 (Mobitz I or Wenckebach) second-degree AV block
19. 
Atrial rhythm: Regular  
Ventricular rhythm: Regular  
Atrial rate: 90 beats/minute  
Ventricular rate: 30 beats/minute  
P wave: Normal size and configuration, except when hidden within T wave  
PR interval: Rate varies  
QRS complex: 0.16 second  
T wave: Normal configuration  
QT interval: 0.56 second  
Other: None  
Interpretation: Third-degree AV block

20. 
Atrial rhythm: Regular  
Ventricular rhythm: Regular  
Atrial rate: 60 beats/minute  
Ventricular rate: 60 beats/minute  
P wave: Normal size and configuration  
PR interval: 0.36 second  
QRS complex: 0.08 second  
T wave: Normal configuration  
QT interval: 0.40 second  
Other: None  
Interpretation: Normal sinus rhythm with first-degree AV block

21. 
Atrial rhythm: Regular  
Ventricular rhythm: Regular  
Atrial rate: 35 beats/minute  
Ventricular rate: 35 beats/minute  
P wave: Normal configuration  
PR interval: 0.18 second  
QRS complex: 0.12 second  
T wave: Normal configuration  
QT interval: 0.44 second  
Other: None  
Interpretation: Sinus bradycardia
22.

Atrial rhythm: Irregular
Ventricular rhythm: Irregular
Atrial rate: 50 beats/minute
Ventricular rate: 50 beats/minute
P wave: Normal configuration
PR interval: 0.20 second
QRS complex: 0.08 second
T wave: Normal configuration
QT interval: 0.52 second
Other: None
Interpretation: Sinus bradycardia with premature atrial contraction (PAC)

23.

Atrial rhythm: Irregular
Ventricular rhythm: Irregular
Atrial rate: Unmeasurable
Ventricular rate: 60 beats/minute
P wave: Not present
PR interval: Unmeasurable
QRS complex: 0.06 second
T wave: Flattened
QT interval: Unmeasurable
Other: None
Interpretation: Junctional escape rhythm

24.

Atrial rhythm: Regular
Ventricular rhythm: Regular
Atrial rate: Unmeasurable
Ventricular rate: 38 beats/minute
P wave: Absent
PR interval: Unmeasurable
QRS complex: 0.04 second
T wave: Normal configuration
QT interval: 0.44 second
Other: None
Interpretation: Junctional rhythm
25.

Atrial rhythm: Regular  
Ventricular rhythm: Regular  
Atrial rate: 68 beats/minute  
Ventricular rate: 43 beats/minute  
P wave: Normal configuration  
PR interval: Unmeasurable  
QRS complex: 0.12 second  
T wave: Normal configuration  
QT interval: Unmeasurable  
Other: P wave no correlation with QRS complex  
Interpretation: Third-degree AV block

26.

Atrial rhythm: Regular  
Ventricular rhythm: Regular  
Atrial rate: 100 beats/minute  
Ventricular rate: 100 beats/minute  
P wave: Normal initially, then becomes inverted with shortened PR interval  
PR interval: 0.14 second initially, then unmeasurable  
QRS complex: 0.08 second  
T wave: Normal configuration  
QT interval: 0.36 second  
Other: None  
Interpretation: Sinus tachycardia leading to junctional tachycardia

27.

Atrial rhythm: Not present  
Ventricular rhythm: Regular  
Atrial rate: Not present  
Ventricular rate: 30 beats/minute  
P wave: Absent  
PR interval: Unmeasurable  
QRS complex: Abnormal  
T wave: Abnormal configuration  
QT interval: Unmeasurable  
Other: None  
Interpretation: Idioventricular rhythm
28.

Atrial rhythm: Irregular  
Ventricular rhythm: Irregular 
Atrial rate: 280 beats/minute  
Ventricular rate: 110 beats/minute  
P wave: Flutter waves  
PR interval: Unmeasurable 
QRS complex: 0.08 second 
T wave: Indiscernible 
QT interval: Unmeasurable 
Other: None  
Interpretation: Atrial flutter with variable block

29.

Atrial rhythm: Regular  
Ventricular rhythm: Regular  
Atrial rate: 94 beats/minute  
Ventricular rate: 94 beats/minute  
P wave: Inverted  
PR interval: 0.12 second  
QRS complex: 0.08 second  
T wave: Inverted  
QT interval: 0.30 second  
Other: None  
Interpretation: Accelerated junctional rhythm

30.

Atrial rhythm: Irregular  
Ventricular rhythm: Irregular  
Atrial rate: 70 beats/minute  
Ventricular rate: 70 beats/minute  
P wave: Normal  
PR interval: 0.16 second  
QRS complex: 0.10 second  
T wave: Biphasic  
QT interval: 0.38 second  
Other: None  
Interpretation: Sinus arrhythmia
31.  
Atrial rhythm: Irregular  
Ventricular rhythm: Irregular  
Atrial rate: 60 beats/minute  
Ventricular rate: 60 beats/minute  
P wave: Variable configurations  
PR interval: 0.16 second  
QRS complex: 0.10 second  
T wave: Inverted  
QT interval: 0.36 second  
Other: None  
Interpretation: Wandering pacemaker

32.  
Atrial rhythm: Irregular  
Ventricular rhythm: Irregular  
Atrial rate: 180 beats/minute  
Ventricular rate: 100 beats/minute  
P wave: Abnormal; slight saw-tooth appearance  
PR interval: Unmeasurable  
QRS complex: 0.10 second  
T wave: Abnormal configuration  
QT interval: Unmeasurable  
Other: None  
Interpretation: Atrial flutter with varying conduction ratios

33.  
Atrial rhythm: Irregular  
Ventricular rhythm: Irregular  
Atrial rate: 88 beats/minute  
Ventricular rate: 88 beats/minute  
P wave: Normal  
PR interval: 0.16 second  
QRS complex: 0.08 second  
T wave: Normal  
QT interval: 0.40 second  
Other: ST-segment depression  
Interpretation: Normal sinus rhythm with PACs
34.  
Atrial rhythm: Slightly irregular  
Ventricular rhythm: Slightly irregular  
Atrial rate: 110 beats/minute  
Ventricular rate: 110 beats/minute  
P wave: P wave shape different for multiple P waves  
PR interval: Unmeasurable  
QRS complex: 0.08 second  
T wave: Indiscernible  
QT interval: Unmeasurable  
Other: None  
Interpretation: Multifocal atrial tachycardia

35.  
Atrial rhythm: Absent  
Ventricular rhythm: Absent  
Atrial rate: Absent  
Ventricular rate: Absent  
P wave: Absent  
PR interval: Unmeasurable  
QRS complex: Absent  
T wave: Absent  
QT interval: Unmeasurable  
Other: None  
Interpretation: Asystole

36.  
Atrial rhythm: Regular  
Ventricular rhythm: Irregular  
Atrial rate: 80 beats/minute  
Ventricular rate: 60 beats/minute  
P wave: Biphasic  
PR interval: 0.12 second  
QRS complex: 0.12 second  
T wave: Normal  
QT interval: 0.34 second  
Other: Two P waves without QRS complex  
Interpretation: Second-degree AV block type II
37. 
Atrial rhythm: Absent  
Ventricular rhythm: Absent  
Atrial rate: Absent  
Ventricular rate: Absent  
P wave: Absent  
PR interval: Unmeasurable  
QRS complex: Absent  
T wave: Absent  
QT interval: Unmeasurable  
Other: None 
Interpretation: Asystole

38. 
Atrial rhythm: Irregular  
Ventricular rhythm: Irregular  
Atrial rate: 60 beats/minute  
Ventricular rate: 120 beats/minute  
P wave: Biphasic when present  
PR interval: 0.16 second  
QRS complex: 0.10 second  
T wave: Elevated  
QT interval: 0.40 second when measurable  
Other: None 
Interpretation: Normal sinus rhythm with PVCs

39. 
Atrial rhythm: Indiscernible  
Ventricular rhythm: Regular  
Atrial rate: Indiscernible  
Ventricular rate: 38 beats/minute  
P wave: Indiscernible  
PR interval: Unmeasurable  
QRS complex: 0.36 second  
T wave: Indiscernible  
QT interval: Unmeasurable  
Other: None 
Interpretation: Idioventricular rhythm
40.

Atrial rhythm: Regular
Ventricular rhythm: Irregular
Atrial rate: 70 beats/minute
Ventricular rate: 140 beats/minute
P wave: Normal with sinus beats
PR interval: 0.14 second
QRS complex: 0.08 second
T wave: Distorted
QT interval: Unmeasurable
Other: None
Interpretation: Normal sinus rhythm with PVCs (bigeminy)

41.

Atrial rhythm: Irregular
Ventricular rhythm: Irregular
Atrial rate: Indiscernible
Ventricular rate: 100 beats/minute
P wave: Indiscernible
PR interval: Unmeasurable
QRS complex: 0.08 second
T wave: Flattened
QT interval: Unmeasurable
Other: None
Interpretation: Atrial fibrillation

42.

Atrial rhythm: Irregular
Ventricular rhythm: Irregular
Atrial rate: Indiscernible
Ventricular rate: 150 beats/minute
P wave: None
PR interval: Unmeasurable
QRS complex: 0.04 second in nonpaced beats
T wave: Flattened
QT interval: Unmeasurable
Other: ST-segment depression
Interpretation: Atrial fibrillation with ventricular pacing
43.
Atrial rhythm: None
Ventricular rhythm: Chaotic
Atrial rate: None
Ventricular rate: Unmeasurable
P wave: Indiscernible
PR interval: Unmeasurable
QRS complex: Unmeasurable
T wave: Indiscernible
QT interval: Unmeasurable
Other: None
Interpretation: Ventricular fibrillation

44.
Atrial rhythm: Not visible
Ventricular rhythm: Regular
Atrial rate: Indiscernible
Ventricular rate: 150 beats/minute
P wave: Not visible
PR interval: Unmeasurable
QRS complex: 0.12 second
T wave: Normal
QT interval: 0.24 second
Other: None
Interpretation: Junctional tachycardia

45.
Atrial rhythm: Irregular
Ventricular rhythm: Irregular
Atrial rate: 80 beats/minute
Ventricular rate: 80 beats/minute
P wave: Normal configuration
PR interval: 0.22 second
QRS complex: 0.10 second
T wave: Normal configuration
QT interval: 0.38 second
Other: None
Interpretation: First-degree AV block with bigeminal PACs
46.
Atrial rhythm: Regular
Ventricular rhythm: Regular
Atrial rate: 150 beats/minute
Ventricular rate: 150 beats/minute
P wave: Peaked
PR interval: 0.12 second
QRS complex: 0.08 second
T wave: Flattened
QT interval: 0.24 second
Other: None
Interpretation: Atrial tachycardia

47.
Atrial rhythm: Regular
Ventricular rhythm: Regular
Atrial rate: 79 beats/minute
Ventricular rate: 79 beats/minute
P wave: Normal configuration
PR interval: 0.16 second
QRS complex: 0.08 second
T wave: Normal configuration
QT interval: 0.40 second
Other: None
Interpretation: Normal sinus rhythm

48.
Atrial rhythm: None
Ventricular rhythm: Regular
Atrial rate: Indiscernible
Ventricular rate: 60 beats/minute
P wave: Not present
PR interval: Unmeasurable
QRS complex: 0.06 second
T wave: Normal configuration
QT interval: 0.32 second
Other: None
Interpretation: Junctional escape rhythm
49.  
Atrial rhythm: Indiscernible  
Ventricular rhythm: Chaotic  
Atrial rate: Unmeasurable  
Ventricular rate: Greater than 300 beats/minute  
P wave: Indiscernible  
PR interval: Unmeasurable  
QRS complex: Abnormal  
T wave: Indiscernible  
QT interval: Unmeasurable  
Other: None  
Interpretation: Ventricular tachycardia

50.  
Atrial rhythm: Slightly irregular  
Ventricular rhythm: Slightly irregular  
Atrial rate: 70 beats/minute  
Ventricular rate: 70 beats/minute  
P wave: Normal configuration  
PR interval: 0.20 second  
QRS complex: 0.08 second  
T wave: Normal configuration  
QT interval: 0.36 second  
Other: Phasic slowing and quickening  
Interpretation: Sinus arrhythmia

51.  
Atrial rhythm: Regular  
Ventricular rhythm: Regular  
Atrial rate: 60 beats/minute  
Ventricular rate: 60 beats/minute  
P wave: Inverted  
PR interval: 0.08 second  
QRS complex: 0.12 second  
T wave: Normal configuration  
QT interval: 0.44 second  
Other: None  
Interpretation: Junctional escape rhythm
52.
Atrial rhythm: Unmeasurable
Ventricular rhythm: Irregular
Atrial rate: Unmeasurable
Ventricular rate: Unmeasurable
P wave: Absent
PR interval: Absent
QRS complex: Unmeasurable
T wave: Indiscernible
QT interval: Unmeasurable
Other: Continuous switching of ventricular rhythm between positive and negative directions
Interpretation: Torsades de pointes

53.
Atrial rhythm: Regular
Ventricular rhythm: Regular
Atrial rate: 107 beats/minute; pacemaker generated
Ventricular rate: 107 beats/minute; pacemaker generated
P wave: Follows pacer spike
PR interval: 0.12 seconds
QRS complex: 0.06 second
T wave: Normal configuration
QT interval: 0.28 second
Other: Pacemaker spikes
Interpretation: AV pacing

54.
Atrial rhythm: Regular
Ventricular rhythm: Irregular
Atrial rate: 80 beats/minute
Ventricular rate: 60 beats/minute
P wave: Normal configuration
PR interval: 0.24 second
QRS complex: 0.12 second
T wave: Normal configuration
QT interval: 0.38 second
Other: Dropped ventricular beats
Interpretation: Normal sinus rhythm with Type II second-degree AV block
55.

*Atrial rhythm:* Irregular  
*Ventricular rhythm:* Irregular  
*Atrial rate:* 70 beats/minute  
*Ventricular rate:* 80 beats/minute  
*P wave:* Normal configuration but absent on premature beats  
*PR interval:* 0.20 second  
*QRS complex:* 0.08 second  
*T wave:* Flattened  
*QT interval:* Unmeasurable  
*Other:* None  
*Interpretation:* Normal sinus rhythm with premature junctional complexes

56.

*Atrial rhythm:* Regular  
*Ventricular rhythm:* Regular  
*Atrial rate:* 50 beats/minute  
*Ventricular rate:* 50 beats/minute  
*P wave:* Normal configuration  
*PR interval:* 0.16 second  
*QRS complex:* 0.12 second  
*T wave:* Normal configuration  
*QT interval:* 0.44 second  
*Other:* None  
*Interpretation:* Sinus bradycardia
Look-alike ECG challenge

Differentiating ECG rhythm strips can often be a tricky proposition, especially when waveform patterns appear strikingly similar. These pairs of rhythm strips are among the most challenging to interpret. Test your knowledge and skill by correctly identifying each rhythm strip; answers begin on page 352.

1.

**Rhythm strip A**

![Rhythm strip A image]

Rhythm strip A is: ____________________________________________

**Rhythm strip B**

![Rhythm strip B image]

Rhythm strip B is: ____________________________________________
2.

*Rhythm strip A*

Rhythm strip A is: ____________________________

*Rhythm strip B*

Rhythm strip B is: ____________________________

3.

*Rhythm strip A*

Rhythm strip A is: ____________________________

*Rhythm strip B*

Rhythm strip B is: ____________________________
4. 

Rhythm strip A

[Image of Rhythm strip A]

Rhythm strip A is: ____________________________

Rhythm strip B

[Image of Rhythm strip B]

Rhythm strip B is: ____________________________

5. 

Rhythm strip A

[Image of Rhythm strip A]

Rhythm strip A is: ____________________________

Rhythm strip B

[Image of Rhythm strip B]

Rhythm strip B is: ____________________________
6. Rhythm strip A

Rhythm strip A is: 

Rhythm strip B

Rhythm strip B is: 

7. Rhythm strip A

Rhythm strip A is: 

Rhythm strip B

Rhythm strip B is: 
Look-Alike ECG Challenge

Answers

1. 

*Rhythm strip A:* Atrial fibrillation  
*Rhythm strip B:* Multifocal atrial tachycardia (MAT)

To help you decide whether a rhythm is atrial fibrillation or the similar MAT, focus on the presence of P waves as well as the atrial and ventricular rhythms. You may find it helpful to look at a longer (greater than 6 seconds) rhythm strip.

**Atrial fibrillation**

- Carefully look for discernible P waves before each QRS complex.  
- If you can’t clearly identify P waves, fibrillatory (f) waves appear in place of P waves, and the rhythm is irregular, then the rhythm is probably atrial fibrillation.  
- Carefully look at the rhythm, focusing on the R-R intervals. Remember that one of the hallmarks of atrial fibrillation is an irregularly irregular rhythm.

**MAT**

- P waves are present in MAT. Keep in mind, however, that the shape of the P waves will vary, with at least three different P wave shapes visible in a single rhythm strip.  
- You should be able to see most, if not all, of the various P wave shapes repeat.  
- Although the atrial and ventricular rhythms are irregular, the irregularity generally isn’t as pronounced as in atrial fibrillation.
2. 

*Rhythm strip A*: Atrial fibrillation  
*Rhythm strip B*: Junctional rhythm

At times, it can be easy to mistake atrial fibrillation for junctional rhythm. Here’s how to tell the two apart.

**Atrial fibrillation**
- Examine lead II, which provides a clear view of atrial activity. Look for fibrillatory (f) waves, which appear as a wavy line. These waves indicate atrial fibrillation. The rhythm is irregular with atrial fibrillation.
- Chronic atrial fibrillation tends to have fine or small f waves and a controlled ventricular rate (less than 100 beats/minute).

**Junctional rhythm**
- Junctional rhythm is always regular.
- Examine lead II. The P wave may occur before, be hidden in, or occur after the QRS complex (see shaded areas above). If visible, the P wave is inverted; if the P wave is before the QRS complex, the PR interval is less than 0.12 second.
3.

*Rhythm strip A*: Wandering pacemaker
*Rhythm strip B*: Premature atrial contraction (PAC)

Because PACs are commonly encountered, it’s possible to mistake wandering pacemaker for PACs unless the rhythm strip is carefully examined. In such cases, you may find it helpful to look at a longer (greater than 6 seconds) rhythm strip.

**Wandering pacemaker**
- Carefully examine the P waves. You must be able to identify at least three different shapes of P waves (see shaded areas above) in wandering pacemaker.
- Atrial rhythm varies slightly, with an irregular P-P interval. Ventricular rhythm also varies slightly, with an irregular R-R interval. These slight variations in rhythm result from the changing site of impulse formation.

**PAC**
- The PAC occurs earlier than the sinus P wave, with an abnormal configuration when compared with a sinus P wave (see shaded area above). It’s possible, but rare, to see multifocal PACs, which originate from multiple ectopic pacemaker sites in the atria. In this setting, the P waves have different shapes.
- With the exception of the irregular atrial and ventricular rhythms that result from the PAC, the underlying rhythm is usually regular.
4.

Rhythm strip A: Accelerated idioventricular rhythm

Rhythm strip B: Accelerated junctional rhythm

Idioventricular rhythm and junctional rhythm appear similar but have different causes. To distinguish between the two, closely examine the duration of the QRS complex and then look for P waves.

Accelerated idioventricular rhythm

- The QRS duration will be greater than 0.12 second.
- The QRS complex will have a wide and bizarre configuration.
- P waves are usually absent.
- The ventricular rate is generally between 40 and 100 beats/minute.

Accelerated junctional rhythm

- The QRS duration and configuration are usually normal.
- Inverted P waves generally occur before or after the QRS complex (see shaded area above). However, remember that P waves may also be buried within QRS complexes.
- The ventricular rate is typically between 60 and 100 beats/minute.
5.

Rhythm strip A: Ventricular flutter
Rhythm strip B: Torsades de pointes

Torsades de pointes is a variant form of ventricular tachycardia, with a rapid ventricular rate that varies between 250 and 350 beats/minute. It’s characterized by QRS complexes that gradually change back and forth, with the amplitude of each successive complex gradually increasing then decreasing. This results in an overall outline of the rhythm commonly described as spindle-shaped.

Ventricular flutter, although rarely recognized, results from the rapid, regular, repetitive beating of the ventricles. It’s produced by a single ventricular focus firing at a rapid rate of 250 to 350 beats/minute. The hallmark of this arrhythmia is its smooth sine-wave appearance.

The illustrations shown here highlight key differences in the two arrhythmias.

**Ventricular flutter**
- Smooth sine-wave appearance

**Torsades de pointes**
- Spindle-shaped appearance
6. 

*Rhythm strip A*: Nonconducted PAC  
*Rhythm strip B*: Type II second-degree atrioventricular (AV) block

An isolated P wave that doesn’t conduct through to the ventricle (P wave without a QRS complex following it; see shaded areas in both illustrations below) may occur with either a nonconducted PAC or type II second-degree AV block. To differentiate the two, look for constancy of the P-P interval. Be aware that mistakenly identifying AV block as nonconducted PACs may have serious consequences. The latter is generally benign, whereas the former can be life-threatening.

**Nonconducted PAC**
- If the P-P interval, including the extra P wave, isn’t constant, it’s a nonconducted PAC.

**Type II second-degree AV block**
- If the P-P interval is constant, including the extra P wave, it’s type II second-degree AV block.
7.

Rhythm strip A: Intermittent ventricular pacing
Rhythm strip B: Premature ventricular contraction (PVC)

Knowing whether your patient has an artificial pacemaker will help you avoid mistaking a ventricular paced beat for a PVC. If your facility uses a monitoring system that eliminates artifact, make sure the monitor is set up correctly for a patient with a pacemaker. Otherwise, the pacemaker spikes may be eliminated as well.

Intermittent ventricular pacing

- The paced ventricular complex will have a pacemaker spike preceding it (see shaded area above). You may need to look in different leads for a bipolar pacemaker spike because it’s small and may be difficult to see.
- The paced ventricular complex of a properly functioning pacemaker won’t occur early or prematurely. It will occur only when the patient’s own ventricular rate falls below the rate set for the pacemaker.

PVC

- PVCs will occur prematurely and won’t have pacemaker spikes preceding them (see shaded areas above).
Quick guide to arrhythmias

Sinus arrhythmia

Features
- Rhythm irregular; varies with respiratory cycle
- P-P and R-R intervals shorter during inspiration, longer during expiration
- Normal P wave preceding each QRS complex

Treatment
- Typically no treatment necessary; possible correction of underlying cause

Sinus tachycardia

Features
- Rhythm regular
- Atrial and ventricular rates > 100 beats/minute
- Normal P wave preceding each QRS complex
- Normal QRS complex
- QT interval commonly shortened

Treatment
- No treatment necessary if patient is asymptomatic
- Correction of underlying cause
- Beta-adrenergic blocker or calcium channel blocker administration, if cardiac ischemia occurs

Sinus bradycardia

Features
- Rhythm regular
- Rate < 60 beats/minute
- Normal P wave preceding each QRS complex
- Normal QRS complex
- QT interval may be prolonged

Treatment
- No treatment needed if patient is asymptomatic; if drugs are cause, possibly discontinuation of use
- For low cardiac output, dizziness, weakness, altered level of consciousness, or low blood pressure, consider temporary or permanent pacemaker and atropine, dopamine, or epinephrine

Sinus arrest

Features
- Rhythm normal, except for missing PQRST complexes
- P wave is periodically absent with entire PQRST complexes missing; when present, normal P wave precedes each QRS complex

Treatment
- No treatment needed if patient is asymptomatic
- For mild symptoms, possible discontinuation of drugs that contribute to arrhythmia
- Atropine administration if patient is symptomatic
- Temporary or permanent pacemaker for repeated episodes
### Premature atrial contractions (PACs)

**Features**
- Premature, abnormal P waves (differ in configuration from normal P waves)
- QRS complexes after P waves, except in blocked PACs
- P wave often buried or identified in preceding T wave

**Treatment**
- No treatment needed if patient is asymptomatic
- Beta-adrenergic blockers or calcium channel blockers, if PACs occur frequently
- Treatment of underlying cause; avoidance of triggers (caffeine or smoking) and use of stress-reduction measures

### Atrial tachycardia

**Features**
- Rhythm regular if block is constant; irregular if not
- Rate 150 to 250 beats/minute
- P waves regular but hidden in preceding T wave; precede QRS complexes
- Usually has sudden onset and termination

**Treatment**
- Vagal stimulation and adenosine administration
- Calcium channel blocker, beta-adrenergic blocker, amiodarone, procainamide, sotalol, or digoxin administration; cardioversion
- Atrial overdrive pacing
- If other treatment fails, synchronized cardioversion may be considered

### Atrial flutter

**Features**
- Atrial rhythm regular; ventricular rhythm variable
- Atrial rate 250 to 400 beats/minute; ventricular rate depends on degree of AV block
- Sawtooth P-wave configuration (F waves)

**Treatment**
- Calcium channel blockers or beta-adrenergic blockers if patient is stable and heart function is normal
- Amiodarone, ibutilide, flecainide, propafenone, or procainamide if arrhythmia is present for less than 48 hours
- Synchronized cardioversion immediately if patient is unstable
- Anticoagulation before cardioversion if rhythm is present for more than 48 hours

### Atrial fibrillation

**Features**
- Atrial and ventricular rhythms grossly irregular
- Atrial rate > 400 beats/minute; ventricular rate varies
- No P waves; replaced by fine fibrillatory waves

**Treatment**
- Calcium channel blockers or beta-adrenergic blockers if patient is stable
- Amiodarone, ibutilide, flecainide, propafenone, or procainamide if arrhythmia is present for less than 48 hours
- Synchronized cardioversion immediately if patient is unstable
- Anticoagulation before cardioversion if rhythm is present for more than 48 hours
QUICK GUIDE TO ARRHYTHMIAS

Wandering pacemaker

Features
- Rhythm irregular
- PR interval varies
- P waves change in configuration, indicating origin in sinoatrial node, atria, or AV junction (Hallmark: At least three different P wave configurations)

Treatment
- No treatment if patient is asymptomatic
- Treatment of underlying cause if patient is symptomatic

Premature junctional contractions

Features
- Rhythm irregular
- P waves before, hidden in, or after QRS complexes; inverted if visible
- PR interval < 0.12 second, if P wave precedes QRS complex
- QRS configuration and duration normal

Treatment
- No treatment if patient is asymptomatic
- Correction of underlying cause
- Discontinuation of digoxin, if appropriate
- Possible elimination of caffeine

Junctional tachycardia

Features
- Rhythm regular
- Rate 100 to 200 beats/minute
- P waves before, hidden in, or after QRS complexes; inverted if visible

Treatment
- Correction of underlying cause
- Discontinuation of digoxin, if appropriate
- Vagal maneuvers, adenosine, amiodarone, beta-adrenergic blockers, or calcium channel blockers to slow rate
- Possible pacemaker insertion
- Ablation therapy, if recurrent

Junctional escape rhythm

Features
- Rhythm regular
- Rate 40 to 60 beats/minute
- P waves before, hidden in, or after QRS complexes; inverted if visible
- PR interval < 0.12 second (measurable only if P wave appears before QRS complex)

Treatment
- Treatment of underlying cause
- Atropine administration for symptomatic slow rate
- Pacemaker insertion if refractory to drugs
- Discontinuation of digoxin, if appropriate
First-degree AV block

**Features**
- Rhythm regular
- PR interval > 0.20 second
- P wave preceding each QRS complex; QRS complex normal

**Treatment**
- Cautious use of digoxin, calcium channel blockers, and beta-adrenergic blockers
- Correction of underlying cause

Type I second-degree AV block
(Mobitz I, Wenckebach)

**Features**
- Atrial rhythm regular
- Ventricular rhythm irregular
- Atrial rate exceeds ventricular rate
- PR interval progressively, but only slightly, longer with each cycle until a P wave appears without a QRS complex (dropped beat)

**Treatment**
- Treatment of underlying cause
- Atropine administration or temporary pacemaker, for symptomatic bradycardia
- Discontinuation of digoxin, if appropriate

Type II second-degree AV block
(Mobitz Type II)

**Features**
- Atrial rhythm regular
- Ventricular rhythm possibly irregular, varying with degree of block
- QRS complexes periodically absent

**Treatment**
- Treatment of underlying cause
- Atropine, dopamine, or epinephrine administration, for symptomatic bradycardia (Atropine may worsen ischemia with MI.)
- Temporary or permanent pacemaker
- Discontinuation of digoxin, if appropriate

Third-degree AV block
(complete heart block)

**Features**
- Atrial and ventricular rhythms regular
- Ventricular rate is 40 to 60 beats/minute (AV node origin); < 40 beats/minute (Purkinje system origin)
- No relationship between P waves and QRS complexes
- QRS complex normal (originating in AV node) or wide and bizarre (originating in Purkinje system)

**Treatment**
- Treatment of underlying cause
- Atropine, dopamine, or epinephrine for symptomatic bradycardia (Don’t use atropine with wide QRS complexes.)
- Temporary or permanent pacemaker
### Premature ventricular contractions (PVCs)

**Features**
- Underlying rhythm regular; P wave absent with PVCs
- Ventricular rhythm irregular during PVC
- QRS premature, usually followed by compensatory pause
- QRS complex wide and bizarre, duration > 0.12 second
- Premature QRS complexes occurring singly, in pairs, or in threes; possibly unifocal or multifocal
- Most ominous when clustered, multifocal, and with R wave on T pattern

**Treatment**
- If warranted, procainamide, lidocaine, or amiodarone administration
- Treatment of underlying cause
- Potassium chloride I.V. if induced by hypokalemia

### Ventricular tachycardia

**Features**
- Ventricular rate 100 to 250 beats/minute
- QRS complexes wide and bizarre; duration > 0.12 second
- P waves indiscernible

**Treatment**
- Monomorphic VT with pulse: Give amiodarone, using Advanced Cardiac Life Support (ACLS) protocol; if unsuccessful, synchronized cardioversion
- Polymorphic VT with normal QT interval: Amiodarone or sotalol using ACLS protocol; if unsuccessful, synchronized cardioversion
- Polymorphic ventricular tachycardia with prolonged QT interval: Stop drugs that may prolong QT interval and treat electrolyte imbalances
- Pulselessness: Initiate cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and follow treatment for ventricular fibrillation

### Ventricular fibrillation

**Features**
- Ventricular rhythm rapid and chaotic
- QRS wide and irregular; no visible P waves

**Treatment**
- Defibrillation and CPR
- Epinephrine or vasopressin, amiodarone or lidocaine; if ineffective, magnesium sulfate or procainamide
- Endotracheal intubation
- Implanted cardioverter-defibrillator if at risk for recurrent ventricular fibrillation

### Asystole

**Features**
- No atrial or ventricular rate or rhythm
- No discernible P waves, QRS complexes, or T waves

**Treatment**
- CPR, following ACLS protocol
- Endotracheal intubation
- Transcutaneous pacemaker
- Treatment of underlying cause
- Repeated doses of epinephrine and atropine, as ordered
aberrant conduction: abnormal pathway of an impulse traveling through the heart’s conduction system
ablation: surgical or radio-frequency removal of an irritable focus in the heart; used to prevent tachyarrhythmias
afterload: resistance that the left ventricle must work against to pump blood through the aorta
amplitude: height of a waveform
arrhythmia: disturbance of the normal cardiac rhythm from the abnormal origin, discharge, or conduction of electrical impulses
artifact: waveform interference in an ECG tracing that results from patient movement or poorly placed or poorly functioning equipment
atrial kick: amount of blood pumped into the ventricles as a result of atrial contraction; contributes approximately 30% of total cardiac output
automaticity: ability of a cardiac cell to initiate an impulse on its own
bigeminy: premature beat occurring every other beat; alternates with normal QRS complexes
biotransformation: series of chemical changes of a substance as a result of enzyme activity; end result of drug biotransformation may be active or inactive metabolites
biphasic: complex containing both an upward and a downward deflection; usually seen when the electrical current is perpendicular to the observed lead
bundle-branch block: slowing or blocking of an impulse as it travels through one of the bundle branches
deflection: direction of a waveform, based on the direction of a current
depolarization: response of a myocardial cell to an electrical impulse that causes movement of ions across the cell membrane, which triggers myocardial contraction
diastole: phase of the cardiac cycle when both atria (atrial diastole) or both ventricles (ventricular diastole) are at rest and filling with blood
ECG complex: waveform representing electrical events of one cardiac cycle; consists of five main waveforms (labeled P, Q, R, S, and T), a sixth waveform (labeled U) that occurs under certain conditions, the PR and QT intervals, and the ST segment
ectopic beat: contraction that occurs as a result of an impulse generated from a site other than the sinoatrial node
electrical axis: direction of the depolarization waveform as seen in the frontal leads
enhanced automaticity: condition in which pacemaker cells increase the firing rate above their inherent rate
excitability: ability of a cardiac cell to respond to an electrical stimulus
extrinsic: not inherently part of the cardiac electrical system
indicative leads: leads that have a direct view of an infarcted area of the heart
intrinsic: naturally occurring electrical stimulus from within the heart’s conduction system
**inverted:** negative or downward deflection on an ECG

**late electrical potentials:** cardiac electrical activity that occurs after depolarization; predisposes the patient to ventricular tachycardia

**lead:** perspective of the electrical activity in a particular area of the heart through the placement of electrodes on the chest wall

**monomorphic:** form of ventricular tachycardia in which the QRS complexes have a uniform appearance from beat to beat

**multiform or multifocal:** type of premature ventricular contractions that have differing QRS configurations as a result of their originating from different irritable sites in the ventricle

**nonsustained ventricular tachycardia:** ventricular tachycardia that lasts less than 30 seconds

**pacemaker:** group of cells that generates impulses to the heart muscle or a battery-powered device that delivers an electrical stimulus to the heart to cause myocardial depolarization

**paroxysmal:** episode of an arrhythmia that starts and stops suddenly

**polymorphic:** type of ventricular tachycardia in which the QRS complexes change from beat to beat

**preload:** stretching force exerted on the ventricular muscle by the blood it contains at the end of diastole

**proarrhythmia:** rhythm disturbance caused or made worse by drugs or other therapy

**quadrigeminy:** premature beat occurring every fourth beat that alternates with three normal QRS complexes

**reciprocal leads:** leads that take a view of an infarcted area of the heart opposite that taken by indicative leads

**reentry mechanism:** failure of a cardiac impulse to follow the normal conduction pathway; instead, it follows a circular path

**refractory:** type of arrhythmia that doesn’t respond to usual treatment measures

**refractory period:** brief period during which excitability in a myocardial cell is depressed

**repolarization:** recovery of the myocardial cells after depolarization during which the cell membrane returns to its resting potential

**retrograde depolarization:** depolarization that occurs backward toward the atrium instead of downward toward the ventricles; results in an inverted P wave

**rhythm strip:** length of ECG paper that shows multiple ECG complexes representing a picture of the heart’s electrical activity in a specific lead

**Stokes-Adams attack:** sudden episode of light-headedness or loss of consciousness caused by an abrupt slowing or stopping of the heartbeat

**sustained ventricular tachycardia:** type of ventricular tachycardia that lasts longer than 30 seconds

**systole:** phase of the cardiac cycle when both of the atria (atrial systole) or the ventricles (ventricular systole) are contracting

**trigeminy:** premature beat occurring every third beat that alternates with two normal QRS complexes

**triplet:** three premature beats occurring together

**uniform or unifocal:** type of premature ventricular contraction that has the same or similar QRS configuration and that originates from the same irritable site in the ventricle

**vagal stimulation:** pharmacologic or manual stimulation of the vagus nerve to slow the heart rate

**Valsalva’s maneuver:** technique of forceful expiration against a closed glottis; used to slow the heart rate
Selected references


Index

A
AAI pacemaker mode, 183, 184i
Accelerated junctional rhythm
causes of, 118
characteristics of, 118i, 119
clinical significance of, 118–119
interventions for, 119
signs and symptoms of, 119
in young children, 119
Acetylcholine, 12
Action potential, antiarrhythmics, 205,
206i
Action potential curve, 13, 15i
Adenosine, 226–227
administration guidelines for, 227
adverse cardiovascular effects of, 227
noncardiac adverse effects of, 227
patient care guidelines for, 227
Adrenergic innervation, 11
A-fib. See Atrial fibrillation.
Afterdepolarization, 19, 88
Afterload, 11, 12i
Amiodarone, 219–221
administration guidelines for, 219
adverse cardiovascular effects of, 220
effects of, 219i
noncardiac adverse effects of, 220
patient care guidelines for, 220–221
Angina, 262–264
electrocardiogram changes associ-
ated with, 263–264, 263i
stable, 263
unstable, 263
Anterior wall myocardial infarction,
271–273
complications of, 273
electrocardiogram characteristics
in, 272i, 273
locating area of damage in, 271t
Antiarrhythmics, 205–232. See also
specific class.
action potential, 205, 206i
classifying, 206–207

Antiarrhythmics (continued)
distribution and clearance of,
207–208
teaching about, 232
Antitachycardia pacing, 198t
Aorta, 7, 8
Aortic valve, 6i, 7
Arrhythmia of death. See Asystole.
Artifact as monitor problem, 37, 39
troubleshooting, 38t
Asystole
causes, 144–145
characteristics of, 145, 145i
interventions for, 145–146
signs and symptoms of, 144, 145
Atria, 4
Atrial arrhythmias, 87–105
causes of, 87–88
Atrial demand pacemaker, 183, 184i
Atrial fibrillation, 99–103
causes of, 99
characteristics of, 100–101, 101i
clinical significance of, 100
interventions for, 101–103
pathophysiology of, 99–100
risk of restoring sinus rhythm in, 100
signs and symptoms, 101
Atrial flutter, 96–99
causes of, 96–97
characteristics of, 97–98, 97i
clinical significance of, 97
differentiating, from sinus tachycar-
dia, 98
interventions for, 98–99
pathophysiology of, 96–97
signs and symptoms of, 98
Atrial kick, 10
Atrial rhythm, measuring, 51, 52i
Atrial standstill, 73
Atrial tachycardia, 91–96
causes of, 91
characteristics of, 91–93, 92i
clinical significance of, 91
Atrial tachycardia (continued)
interventions for, 95–96
multifocal, 94i
paroxysmal, 94i
pathophysiology of, 91
signs and symptoms, 93, 95
Atrioventricular blocks, 153–167
classifying, 155
factors leading to, 153–155
in older adults, 154
Atrioventricular node, 16–17
pediatric rate of impulse discharge
by, 17, 18
Atrioventricular node ablation, 195i, 196
Atrioventricular valves, 6–7, 6i
Atropine, 228–229
administration guidelines for, 228
adverse cardiovascular effects of,
228
noncardiac adverse effects of, 228
patient care guidelines for, 228–229
Augmented limb leads, 241, 241i, 242
placement of, 246i
views of the heart reflected by, 241i
Automated-external defibrillators,
143–144
Automaticity, 13, 18
as cause of atrial arrhythmias, 87
B
Bachmann’s bundle, 16
Backward conduction of impulses, 18
Baroreceptors, 13
Baseline as monitoring problem, 39t
Beta1-adrenergic receptors, 216
Beta2-adrenergic receptors, 216
Beta-adrenergic blockers, 216–218
administration guidelines for, 217–218
adverse cardiovascular effects of,
218
cardioselective, 216
effects, 217
noncardiac adverse effects of, 218

i refers to an illustration; t refers to a table.
Beta-adrenergic blockers (continued)  
noncardioselective, 216  
patient care guidelines for, 218  
Biotransformation, 208  
Bipolar limb leads, 240, 241i, 244  
placement of, 244, 245i  
views of the heart reflected by, 241i  
Biventricular pacemaker, 191–194, 192i  
benefits of, 191–192  
candidates for, 193  
lead placement for, 191, 192i  
patient teaching for, 194  
Bradycardia. See also Sinus bradycardia.  
in children, 68  
induced syncope and, 68  
symptomatic, 70  
Bradycardia pacing, 198t  
Bradycardia-tachycardia syndrome, 78  
Brady-tachy syndrome, 78  
Breathing, Sinus arrhythmia and, 64, 64i  
Bundle of His, 16, 17  
Bundle of Kent, 112i  
Bundle-branch block, 264–267  
left, 265–267, 267i, 268i  
right, 264–265, 265i, 266i  
C  
Calan. See Verapamil.  
Calcium channel blockers. See Class IV antiarrhythmics.  
Caliper method of measuring rhythm, 52i  
Capillaries, circulation and, 11  
Cardiac cycle, 9–11, 10i  
cardiac output and, 10–11  
phases of, 13–14, 15i  
Cardiac output, 10–11  
Cardiac resynchronization therapy.  
See Biventricular pacemaker.  
Cardiac rhythm observing, 35–37, 36i  
Cardiac veins, 9  
Cardiovascular system  
apihy of, 3–9  
physiology of, 9–19  
Cardioversion, 198t  
Cardizem. See Diltiazem.  
Carotid sinus massage, 13, 95, 95i  
older patients, 95  
Cholinergic innervation, 11–13  
Chordae tendineae, 6i, 7  
Circulation  
capillaries and, 11  
collateral, 9  
pulmonary, 7  
systemic, 7  
Circumflex artery, 9  
Class Ia antiarrhythmics, 207–211  
action potential and, 206i  
effects of, 209i  
noncardiac adverse effects of, 210, 211  
Class Ib antiarrhythmics, 212–213  
action potential and, 206i  
effects of, 212i  
noncardiac effects of, 213  
Class Ic antiarrhythmics, 213–216  
action potential and, 206i  
effects of, 214i  
noncardiac effects of, 214, 216  
Class II antiarrhythmics, 216–219  
action potential and, 206i  
effects of, 217i  
noncardiac effects of, 218  
Class III antiarrhythmics, 219–223  
action potential and, 206i  
effects of, 219i  
noncardiac effects of, 220, 223  
Class IV antiarrhythmics, 223–226  
action potential and, 206i  
effects of, 224i  
noncardiac effects of, 225, 226  
Clip-on leadwires, 35, 35i  
Coding system for pacemakers, 181–183, 182i  
Collateral circulation, 9  
Compensatory pause, 130  
Complete atioventricular dissociation, 166  
Complete heart block. See Third-degree atioventricular block.  
Conduction system, 15–17, 16i  
Conductivity, 13  
Congenital heart repair, heart block  
after, 164  
Contractility, 11, 12i, 13  
Coronary arteries, 8–9  
Coronary ostium, 8  
Coronary sinus, 9  
Corvert. See Ibutilide.  
Countdown method of calculating heart rate, 53  
Current direction, wave deflection and, 24, 24i  

D  
DDD pacemaker mode, 185–186, 185i  
evaluating rhythm strip for, 186  
Deciphering PVCs, 131  
Defibrillation, 142–143, 198t  
Degree method for determining heart’s axis, 260, 261i  
Delayed afterdepolarization, 19  
Delta wave, 112i  
Depolarization, 13  
Depolarization-repolarization cycle, 13  
phases of, 13–14, 14i  
Diastole, 8, 9  
Digoxin, 229–230  
administration guidelines for, 229  
adverse cardiovascular effects of, 229–230  
effects, 229i  
noncardiac adverse effects, 230  
patient care guidelines for, 230  
Digoxin toxicity, signs of, 91  
Diltiazem, 225–226  
administration guidelines for, 225  
adverse cardiovascular effects of, 225  
effects, 225i  
noncardiac adverse effects of, 226  
patient care guidelines for, 226  
Dofetilide, 222–223  
administration guidelines for, 222  
adverse cardiovascular effects of, 222  
effects, 219i  
noncardiac adverse effects of, 223  
patient care guidelines for, 223  

E  
Ectopy, 18  
Einthoven’s triangle, 28i
Electrical axis, 242
determining, 257–260, 258i, 259i
development
across the life span, 259
causes, 262
factors that influence, 260–262
hexaxial reference system and, 258, 258i

Electrical impulses
abnormal, 18–19
transmission of, 13–15, 14i, 15i

Electrical interference as monitor problem, 37
troubleshooting, 39t

Electrocardiogram complex, 43–51, 44i, 46i, 47i, 48i, 50t
Electrocardiogram grid, 36, 36i
Electrocardiogram strip, 36, 36i
horizontal axis, 36i, 37
vertical axis, 36i, 37

Electrocardiography
current direction and wave deflection in, 24, 24i
information recorded in, 24
leads in, 24. See also Leads.
monitoring, 26
in older adult, 47
planes in, 25
types of, 25

Embolism, recognizing, 81
Endocardial pacemaker, implanting, 179i
Endocardium, 4, 5i
Epidermal pacemakers, 178
Epicanthus, 4, 5i
Epinephrine, 11, 230–231
administration guidelines for, 230
adverse cardiovascular effects of, 231
noncardiac adverse effects, 231
patient care guidelines for, 231
Esmolol, 217. See also Class II antiarrhythmics.

Excitability, 13

FG
Failure to capture as pacemaker malfunction, 187, 188i, 189

Failure to pace as pacemaker malfunction, 188i, 189
Failure to sense intrinsic beats as pacemaker malfunction, 188i, 189
False high-rate alarm as monitoring problem, 38t
Fast channel blockers. See Class Ia antiarrhythmics.
Faulty equipment, monitoring problems and, 39
Fibrillatory waves, 99
Fibrous pericardium, 4, 5i
1,500 method for determining heart rate, 53
First-degree atrioventricular block, 155–157
causes of, 155
characteristics of, 156, 156i
clinical significance of, 155–156
interventions for, 157
signs and symptoms of, 156
First-degree sinoatrial block, 74i
Five-leadwire system, 31
electrode positions for, 32–33i

Flecainide, 213–215
administration guidelines for, 213
adverse cardiovascular effects of, 213–214
effects, 214i
noncardiac adverse effects of, 214
patient care guidelines for, 214–215

Flutter waves, 96
Footprints of Wenckebach, 158
Frontal plane of heart, 25
Fuzzy baseline as monitor problem, 37
troubleshooting, 39t

Heart (continued)
horizontal plane of, 25
nerve supply to, 11–13
pathway through, 15–18
pediatric, location of, 4
transmission of electrical impulses and, 13–15
Heart murmur, 7
Heart rate, determining, 52–53, 53i
Heart rhythm, determining, 51–52, 52i
Heart sounds, 6
Hexaxial reference system and, 258, 258i
High-grade atrioventricular block, 161i
His-Purkinje system, 17
Horizontal plane of heart, 25

I
Ibutilide, 221–222
administration guidelines for, 221
adverse cardiovascular effects of, 221
effects, 219i
patient care guidelines for, 221–222
ICD. See Implantable cardioverter-defibrillator.
Idioventricular rhythms, 133–136
accelerated, 134, 135i
causes of, 133
characteristics of, 133–134, 134i, 135i
clinical significance of, 133
interventions for, 135–136, 136i
signs and symptoms of, 134
ventricular escape beat and, 133
Implantable cardioverter-defibrillator indications for, 197
mechanics of, 197
patient care guidelines for, 199
patient teaching for, 199–200
programming, 198–199
therapies delivered by, 197–198, 198t
Inferior vena cava, 4, 6i, 7
Inferior wall myocardial infarction, 273
cause of, 273
complications of, 273
electrocardiogram characteristics in, 273, 276i
locating area of damage in, 271t
Instantaneous vectors, 242
Interatrial septum, 4
Intermittent ventricular pacing, rhythm strip for, 185, 186i
Internodal tract, 16i
Interventricular septum, 5
Isoelectric waveform, 24
Isovolumetric relaxation as cardiac cycle phase, 10i
Isovolumetric ventricular contraction as cardiac cycle phase, 10i
J point, 48
Junctional arrhythmias, 111–122
comparing rates in, 121i
differentiating, from atrial arrhythmias, 113
finding P wave in, 113i
Junctional escape rhythm, 116–117
causes of, 116
characteristics of, 116–117, 117i
in children and athletes, 116
clinical significance of, 116
interventions for, 117
rhythm strip for, 117i
signs and symptoms of, 117
Junctional tachycardia, 119–122
causes of, 120
characteristics of, 120–121, 120i
clinical significance of, 120
interventions for, 121–122
signs and symptoms of, 121
Left bundle-branch block
disorders associated with, 265
electrocardiogram changes in, 266–267, 268i
pathophysiology of, 267i
Lidocaine, 212–213
administration guidelines for, 212
adverse cardiovascular effects of, 213
effects of, 212i
noncardiac adverse effects of, 213
patient care guidelines for, 213
Magnesium sulfate, 231–232
administration guidelines for, 231
adverse cardiovascular effects of, 232
noncardiac adverse effects of, 232
patient care guidelines for, 232
Mean instantaneous vector, 242
Mean QRS vector, 242
Mediastinum, location of heart and, 3
Mental status changes, sick sinus syndrome and, 81
Mitral valve, 6–7, 6i
Mobitz, Woldemar, 158
Mobitz type I block. See Type I second-degree atrioventricular block.
Mobitz type II block. See Type II second-degree atrioventricular block.
Modified chest leads, 30–31
Monitor problems, 37, 39
troubleshooting, 38–39t
Monitoring systems, 26
Multichannel recorders, 248
tracings from, 248, 249i
Multifocal atrial tachycardia, 94i
rhythm strip for, 94i
Myocardial infarction, 267–271
electrocardiogram changes in, 270
identifying types of, 271–273, 271t,
272, 274i, 275–279, 275i, 276i,
277i, 278i
interventions for, 270–271
locating areas of damage in, 271t
patient monitoring in, 270

INDEX

Interatrial septum, 4
Intermittent ventricular pacing, rhythm strip for, 185, 186i
Internodal tract, 16i
Interventricular septum, 5
Isoelectric waveform, 24
Isovolumetric relaxation as cardiac cycle phase, 10i
Isovolumetric ventricular contraction as cardiac cycle phase, 10i
J point, 48
Junctional arrhythmias, 111–122
comparing rates in, 121i
differentiating, from atrial arrhythmias, 113
finding P wave in, 113i
Junctional escape rhythm, 116–117
causes of, 116
characteristics of, 116–117, 117i
in children and athletes, 116
clinical significance of, 116
interventions for, 117
rhythm strip for, 117i
signs and symptoms of, 117
Junctional tachycardia, 119–122
causes of, 120
characteristics of, 120–121, 120i
clinical significance of, 120
interventions for, 121–122
signs and symptoms of, 121
Left bundle-branch block
disorders associated with, 265
electrocardiogram changes in, 266–267, 268i
pathophysiology of, 267i
Lidocaine, 212–213
administration guidelines for, 212
adverse cardiovascular effects of, 213
effects of, 212i
noncardiac adverse effects of, 213
patient care guidelines for, 213
Magnesium sulfate, 231–232
administration guidelines for, 231
adverse cardiovascular effects of, 232
noncardiac adverse effects of, 232
patient care guidelines for, 232
Mean instantaneous vector, 242
Mean QRS vector, 242
Mediastinum, location of heart and, 3
Mental status changes, sick sinus syndrome and, 81
Mitral valve, 6–7, 6i
Mobitz, Woldemar, 158
Mobitz type I block. See Type I second-degree atrioventricular block.
Mobitz type II block. See Type II second-degree atrioventricular block.
Modified chest leads, 30–31
Monitor problems, 37, 39
troubleshooting, 38–39t
Monitoring systems, 26
Multichannel recorders, 248
tracings from, 248, 249i
Multifocal atrial tachycardia, 94i
rhythm strip for, 94i
Myocardial infarction, 267–271
electrocardiogram changes in, 270
identifying types of, 271–273, 271t,
272, 274i, 275–279, 275i, 276i,
277i, 278i
interventions for, 270–271
locating areas of damage in, 271t
patient monitoring in, 270

INDEX

Interatrial septum, 4
Intermittent ventricular pacing, rhythm strip for, 185, 186i
Internodal tract, 16i
Interventricular septum, 5
Isoelectric waveform, 24
Isovolumetric relaxation as cardiac cycle phase, 10i
Isovolumetric ventricular contraction as cardiac cycle phase, 10i
J point, 48
Junctional arrhythmias, 111–122
comparing rates in, 121i
differentiating, from atrial arrhythmias, 113
finding P wave in, 113i
Junctional escape rhythm, 116–117
causes of, 116
characteristics of, 116–117, 117i
in children and athletes, 116
clinical significance of, 116
interventions for, 117
rhythm strip for, 117i
signs and symptoms of, 117
Junctional tachycardia, 119–122
causes of, 120
characteristics of, 120–121, 120i
clinical significance of, 120
interventions for, 121–122
signs and symptoms of, 121
Left bundle-branch block
disorders associated with, 265
electrocardiogram changes in, 266–267, 268i
pathophysiology of, 267i
Lidocaine, 212–213
administration guidelines for, 212
adverse cardiovascular effects of, 213
effects of, 212i
noncardiac adverse effects of, 213
patient care guidelines for, 213
Magnesium sulfate, 231–232
administration guidelines for, 231
adverse cardiovascular effects of, 232
noncardiac adverse effects of, 232
patient care guidelines for, 232
Mean instantaneous vector, 242
Mean QRS vector, 242
Mediastinum, location of heart and, 3
Mental status changes, sick sinus syndrome and, 81
Mitral valve, 6–7, 6i
Mobitz, Woldemar, 158
Mobitz type I block. See Type I second-degree atrioventricular block.
Mobitz type II block. See Type II second-degree atrioventricular block.
Modified chest leads, 30–31
Monitor problems, 37, 39
troubleshooting, 38–39t
Monitoring systems, 26
Multichannel recorders, 248
tracings from, 248, 249i
Multifocal atrial tachycardia, 94i
rhythm strip for, 94i
Myocardial infarction, 267–271
electrocardiogram changes in, 270
identifying types of, 271–273, 271t,
272, 274i, 275–279, 275i, 276i,
277i, 278i
interventions for, 270–271
locating areas of damage in, 271t
patient monitoring in, 270
Myocardial infarction (continued)
reciprocal changes, 268, 269i
zone of infarction in, 269–270, 269i
zone of injury in, 269i, 270
zone of ischemia in, 269i, 270
Myocardium, 4, 5i

N
Nonpharmacologic treatments, 175–200
Norepinephrine, 11
Normal sinus rhythm, 56–57, 56i
characteristics, 56–57

O
Older adults
atrioventricular blocks, 154
carotid sinus massage, 95
electrocardiogram changes in, 47
heart changes in, 5
pacemakers, 181
prolonged effects of diltiazem in, 226
Oversensing of pacemaker, 189

P
P wave, 43–45, 44i, 257
in accelerated junctional rhythm, 118i, 119
in atrial fibrillation, 100, 101i
in atrial flutter, 97, 97i
in atrial tachycardia, 91–92, 92i
cardiac characteristics, 43–44
evaluation, 54
first-degree AV block, 156, 156i
in idioventricular rhythms, 134, 134i
in junctional escape rhythm, 116, 117i
in junctional tachycardia, 120–121, 120i
in multifocal atrial tachycardia, 94i
in normal sinus rhythm, 56i, 57
in paroxysmal atrial tachycardia, 94i
in premature atrial contractions, 89, 90i
in premature junctional contraction, 114, 115i
in premature ventricular contraction (PVC), 129–130, 129i
in sick sinus syndrome, 79, 80i
P wave (continued)
in sinus arrest, 76, 76i
in sinus arrhythmia, 65i
in sinus bradycardia, 68, 69i
in sinus tachycardia, 71, 71i
third-degree atrioventricular block, 164, 165i
type I second-degree atrioventricular block, 158, 158i
type II second-degree AV block, 162i
variation, 45
in ventricular fibrillation, 142, 143i
in ventricular tachycardia, 138, 138i
in wandering pacemaker, 104, 104i
Pacemaker cells, 18, 18i
Pacemaker spikes, 177, 177i
Pacemakers
biventricular, 191–194, 192i
coding system for, 181–183, 182i
evaluating, 186–187
indications for, 175
mechanics of, 175–177
modes of, 183–186, 184i, 185i
in older adults, 181
pacing leads for, 176, 176i
patient care guidelines for, 189–190
patient teaching for, 190–191
in pediatric patients, 183
permanent, 178
placing, 179i
pulse generator for, 176–177, 180–181, 180i
spikes and, 177, 177i
synchronous, 181
temporary, 178–181
troubleshooting problems with, 187–189, 188i
Pacing leads, 176, 176i
PACs. See Premature atrial contractions.
Paper-and-pencil method of measuring rhythm, 52i
Parasympathetic nervous system, heart and, 12–13
Pediatric patients
bradycardia in, 68
location of heart in, 4
Pediatric patients (continued)
normal electrocardiogram findings in, 257
obtaining electrocardiogram in, 243
pacemakers in, 183
Q waves in, 270
QRS complex, 46i
rate of impulse discharge in, 17, 18
tachycardia in, 68
torsades de pointes in, 139
Pericardial effusion, 4
Pericardial fluid, 4
Pericardial space, 4, 5i
Pericardium, 4, 5i
Permanent pacemakers, 178
placing, 179i
Pharmacologic treatments, 205–232
Plane, 25
Posterior wall myocardial infarction, 278–279
cause of, 278
electrocardiogram characteristics of, 278–279, 278i
locating area of damage in, 271t
Posterior-lead electrocardiogram, 244, 246, 247
Potassium channel blockers. See Class III antiarrhythmics.
P-P intervals, 51, 52i
in sinus arrhythmia, 65
PR interval, 44i, 45, 257
in accelerated junctional rhythm, 118i, 119
in atrial fibrillation, 101i
in atrial flutter, 97i
in atrial tachycardia, 92, 92i
cardiac characteristics, 45
determining duration of, 54
first-degree AV block, 156, 156i
in idioventricular rhythms, 134, 134i
in junctional escape rhythm, 116, 117i
in junctional tachycardia, 120–121, 120i
in multifocal atrial tachycardia, 94i
in normal sinus rhythm, 56i, 57
in paroxysmal atrial tachycardia, 94i
in premature atrial contractions, 89, 90i
in premature junctional contraction, 114, 115i
in premature ventricular contraction (PVC), 129–130, 129i
in sick sinus syndrome, 79, 80i
INDEX

PR interval (continued)
in premature junctional contraction, 114, 115i
in premature ventricular contraction (PVC), 129, 129i
in sick sinus syndrome, 79, 80i
in sinus arrest, 76, 76i
in sinus arrhythmia, 65i
in sinus bradycardia, 68, 69i
in sinus tachycardia, 71, 71i
third-degree atrioventricular block, 164, 165i
type I second-degree atrioventricular block, 158, 158i
type II second-degree AV block, 161, 162i
variations, 45
in ventricular fibrillation, 142, 143i
in ventricular tachycardia, 138, 138i
in wandering pacemaker, 104, 104i
Precordial leads, 28–29, 242
placement of, 30i, 244, 247i
view of the heart reflected by, 241i
Preload, 11, 12i
Premature atrial contractions, 88–90
causes of, 88
characteristics of, 89, 90i
clinical significance of, 88–89
conducted, 88, 89
differentiating, from type II second degree atrioventricular block, 89i
interventions for, 90
nonconducted, 88, 89
pathophysiology of, 88–89
rhythm strip for, 90i
signs and symptoms, 89–90
triggers for, 88
Premature junctional contraction causes of, 114
characteristics of, 114, 115i
interventions for, 115
signs and symptoms of, 115
Premature ventricular contractions bigeminy and, 131i
causes, 128
characteristics of, 129–130, 129i
clinical significance of, 128–129
Preventricular contractions (continued)
compensatory pause and, 130
differentiating, from other rhythms, 131
interventions for, 132
multiform, 131i
paired, 131i
rhythm strip for, 129i
R-on-T phenomenon and, 132i
signs and symptoms of, 130
trigeminy and, 131i
Procainamide, 210–211
administration guidelines for, 210–211
adverse cardiovascular effects of, 211
effects of, 209i
monitoring, 211
noncardiac adverse effects of, 211
patient care guidelines for, 211
Prolonged QT syndrome, 50
Prostrenyl. See Procainamide.
Propafenone, 215–216
administration guidelines for, 215
adverse cardiovascular effects of, 215
effects of, 214i
noncardiac adverse effects of, 216
patient care guidelines for, 215
Propranolol, 216, 217. See also Class II
antiarrhythmics.
Pulmonary arteries, 6i, 7
Pulmonary circulation, 7
Pulmonary vein ablation, 195i
Pulmonary veins, 6i, 7
Pulmonic valve, 7, 10i
Pulse generator for pacemaker, 176–177, 180–181, 180i
Pulseless arrest, advanced cardiac life support algorithm for, 142
Pulseless electrical activity, 146
Purkinje fibers, 16i, 17
pediatric rate of impulse discharge by, 18
PVCs. See Premature ventricular contractions.
QRS complex, 45–48, 46t, 47i, 257
in accelerated junctional rhythm, 118i, 119
in atrial fibrillation, 101i
in atrial flutter, 97i, 98
in atrial tachycardia, 91–92, 92i
determining duration of, 54
documenting, 47i
first-degree AV block, 156, 156i
in idioventricular rhythms, 134, 134i
in junctional escape rhythm, 116, 117i
in junctional tachycardia, 120–121, 120i
in multifocal atrial tachycardia, 94i
in normal sinus rhythm, 56i, 57
in paroxysmal atrial tachycardia, 94i
in pediatric patients, 46t
in premature atrial contractions, 89, 90i
premature junctional contraction, 114, 115i
in premature ventricular contraction (PVC), 129–130, 129i
in sick sinus syndrome, 79, 80i
in sinus arrest, 76, 76i
in sinus arrhythmia, 65i
in sinus bradycardia, 68, 69i
in sinus tachycardia, 71, 71i
third-degree atrioventricular block, 164, 165i
type I second-degree atrioventricular block, 158, 158i
type II second-degree AV block, 161, 162i
in ventricular fibrillation, 142, 143i
in ventricular tachycardia, 138, 138i
in wandering pacemaker, 104, 104i
waveform configurations of, 47i
QT interval, 44i, 49–50
in accelerated junctional rhythm, 118i, 119
in atrial fibrillation, 101i
in atrial flutter, 97i, 98
in atrial tachycardia, 92i, 93
characteristics, 49
correcting, 55
determining duration of, 55
drugs that increase, 50t

Q wave, 44i, 47, 257
in pediatric patient, 270

i refers to an illustration; t refers to a table.
QT interval (continued)
- first-degree AV block, 156, 156i
- in idioventricular rhythms, 134, 134i
- in junctional escape rhythm, 116, 117i
- in junctional tachycardia, 120i
- in multifocal atrial tachycardia, 94i
- in normal sinus rhythm, 57
- in paroxysmal atrial tachycardia, 94i
- in premature atrial contractions, 90i
- premature junctional contraction, 114, 115i
- in premature ventricular contraction (PVC), 129, 129i
- in sick sinus syndrome, 79, 80i
- in sinus arrest, 76, 76i
- in sinus arrhythmia, 65i
- in sinus bradycardia, 68, 69i
- in sinus tachycardia, 71, 71i
- third-degree atrioventricular block, 165i
- type I second-degree atrioventricular block, 158i
- type II second-degree AV block, 162i
- in ventricular fibrillation, 142, 143i
- in ventricular tachycardia, 138, 138i
- in wandering pacemaker, 104, 104i
- Quadrant method for determining heart’s axis, 259–260, 259i
Quinaglutate. See Quinidine.
Quinidex. See Quinidine.
Quinidine, 208–210
- administration guidelines for, 208–209
- adverse cardiovascular effects of, 209
- effects of, 209i
- noncardiac adverse effects of, 210
- patient care guidelines for, 209–210

R
- R wave, 44i, 47
  - progression of, 256, 256i
Radiofrequency ablation, 155, 194–197
- candidates for, 194
- interventions for, 196
- patient teaching for, 196–197
- procedure for, 194–196, 195i

S
- S wave, 44i, 47
  - Second-degree type I sinoatrial block, 74i
- Second-degree type II sinoatrial block, 74i
  - Semilunar valves, 6, 7
  - Septal wall myocardial infarction, 273
  - electrocardiogram characteristics in, 273, 274i
  - locating area of damage in, 271t
- Sequence method of determining heart rate, 53, 53i
- Serous pericardium, 4, 5i

Reentry events, 18
- as cause of atrial arrhythmias, 88
- Regurgitation, 6
- Repolarization, 13
- Resting potential, 13
- Retrograde conduction, 18
- Rhythm strip, 25
  - electrical activity monitored on, 25
  - interpreting, 43–57
  - 8-step method for, 51–55
  - patterns on, 158, 159i
- Rhythms of last resort. See Idioventricular rhythms.
- Sick sinus syndrome
  - causes of, 78–79
  - characteristics of, 79–80, 80i
  - clinical significance of, 79
  - complication of, 79
  - embolism and, 81
  - interventions for, 81
  - mental status changes and, 81
  - rhythm disturbances associated with, 79
  - signs and symptoms of, 80
- Signal-averaged electrocardiogram, 250–251
  - candidates for, 250
  - electrode placements for, 250i
  - mechanics of, 250–251
- Single-lead electrocardiogram. See Rhythm strip.
- Sinoatrial blocks, 74–75i
- Sinoatrial node, 15–16, 16i
  - blood supply, 63
  - firing rate, 63
  - innervation of, 63
- Sinus arrest, 73–78
  - causes of, 73
  - characteristics of, 75–76, 76i
  - clinical significance of, 73, 75
  - interventions for, 76–78
  - sick sinus syndrome and, 77
  - signs and symptoms of, 76
  - syncope and, 77
- Sinus arrhythmia, 64–66
  - breathing and, 64, 64i
  - causes of, 64
  - characteristics of, 65–66, 65i
  - clinical significance of, 64–65
  - interventions for, 66
  - sick sinus syndrome and, 65
- Sinus bradycardia, 66–70. See also Bradycardia.
  - causes of, 67
  - characteristics of, 68, 69i
  - clinical significance of, 67
  - interventions for, 68–69
  - signs and symptoms of, 67
- Sinus nodal dysfunction. See Sick sinus syndrome.
- Sinus node arrhythmias, 63–81

i refers to an illustration; t refers to a table.
Sinus pause, 73
assessing for, 74–75
Sinus rhythm, risk of restoring, in atrial fibrillation, 100
Sinus tachycardia, 70–73
causes of, 70
characteristics of, 71, 71i
clinical significance of, 70
interventions for, 72–73
signs and symptoms of, 71
Sinuses of Valsalva, 8
60-cycle interference as monitor problem, 37
troubleshooting, 39t
Snap-on leadwires, 35, 35i
Sodium channel blockers. See Class Ia antiarrhythmics.
Sotalol, 218. See also Class II antiarrhythmics.
ST segment, 257
changes, 48i
characteristics, 48
depression of, 48i
elevation of, 48i
Starling’s law, 12i
Stokes-Adams attack, 68
Stroke volume, 11
factors that affect, 11
Superior vena cava, 4, 6i, 7
Supraventricular tachycardia, 121
Sympathetic nervous system, heart and, 11
Synchronized cardioversion, 102
Synchronous pacemakers, 181
Synccope, sinus arrest and, 77
Systemic circulation, 7
Systole, 8, 9

T wave, 44i, 49, 257
in accelerated junctional rhythm, 118i, 119
in atrial fibrillation, 101i
in atrial flutter, 97i
in atrial tachycardia, 92–93, 92i
characteristics of, 49
evaluation, 55

T wave (continued)
first-degree atrioventricular block, 156, 156i
in idioventricular rhythms, 134, 134i
in junctional escape rhythm, 116, 117i
in junctional tachycardia, 120i, 121
in multifocal atrial tachycardia, 94i
in normal sinus rhythm, 57
in paroxysmal atrial tachycardia, 94i
in premature atrial contractions, 89, 90i
in premature junctional contraction, 114, 115i
in premature ventricular contraction (PVC), 129i, 130
in sick sinus syndrome, 79, 80i
in sinus arrest, 76, 76i
in sinus arrhythmia, 65i
in sinus bradycardia, 68, 69i
in sinus tachycardia, 71, 71i
third-degree atrioventricular block, 164, 165i
type I second-degree atrioventricular block, 158i
type II second-degree atrioventricular block, 162i
in ventricular fibrillation, 142, 143i
in ventricular tachycardia, 138, 138i
in wandering pacemaker, 104, 104i
Tachycardia. See also Sinus tachycardia.
advanced cardiac life support algorithm for, 140
children, 68
pathophysiology of, 72
Tambocor. See Flecainide.
Telemetry monitoring, 26
advantages of, 26
electrode placement for, 31, 32–33i
Temporary pacemakers, 178–181
epicardial, 178
indications for, 178
transcutaneous, 179–180
transvenous, 178
10-times method for determining heart rate, 52–53

Third-degree atrioventricular block, 163–167
after congenital heart repair, 164
causes of, 163–164
characteristics of, 164, 165i
clinical significance of, 164
interventions for, 165–167
signs and symptoms of, 164–165
Third-degree sinoatrial block, 75i
Three-leadwire system, 31
electrode positions for, 32–33i
Tikosyn. See Dofetilide.
Tocainide, 212. See also Class Ib antiarrhythmics.
Tonocard. See Tocainide.
Torsades de pointes
pediatric patients, 139
rhythm strip for, 139i
Transcutaneous pacemaker, 136i,
179–180
Transletelephonic cardiac monitoring, 240
Transvenous pacemakers, 178
Tricuspid valve, 6–7, 6i
Triggered activity, 19
as cause of atrial arrhythmias, 88
12-lead electrocardiogram, 25, 239
advantages of, 239
disorders that affect, 262–271
electrical axis and, 242
interpreting, 255–279
leads used in, 240–242
multichannel recordings of, 248, 249i
obtaining, in pediatric patient, 243
pathologic conditions identified by, 239
preparing to record, 243–244, 245–247i, 246–248
printouts produced by, 248–249, 249i
transtelephonic monitoring and, 240
views reflected on, 25, 241i
2:1 second-degree atrioventricular (AV) block, 160
Type I second-degree atrioventricular block, 157–159
causes of, 157
characteristics of, 157–158, 158i
clinical significance of, 157

i refers to an illustration; t refers to a table.
Type I second-degree atrioventricular block (continued)
interventions for, 159
signs and symptoms of, 159
Type II second-degree atrioventricular block, 160–163
causes of, 160
characteristics of, 161, 162
clinical significance of, 160
Type II second-degree atrioventricular block (continued)
interventions for, 162–163
signs and symptoms of, 162

U
U wave, 44i, 51
characteristics, 51
Undersensing of pacemaker, 188i, 189
Universal pacemaker. See DDD pacemaker mode.

V
Vagus nerve, transmission of impulses and, 12–13
Ventricles, 5, 6
Ventricular arrhythmia, 127–146
characteristics of, 127
clinical significance of, 128
signs and symptoms of, 127
Ventricular demand pacemaker, 184–185, 184i
Ventricular ejection as cardiac cycle phase, 10i
Ventricular escape beat, 133
Ventricular fibrillation, 141–144
causes, 141
characteristics of, 142, 143i
clinical significance of, 142
interventions for, 142–144
signs and symptoms of, 142
Ventricular filling as cardiac cycle phase, 10i
Ventricular rhythm, measuring, 51, 52i
Ventricular standstill. See Asystole.
Ventricular tachycardia, 137–141
causes, 137
characteristics of, 137–138, 138i
clinical significance of, 137
interventions for, 140–141
signs and symptoms of, 139–140
torsades de pointes as form of, 139i
in pediatric patients, 139
Verapamil, 224–225
administration guidelines for, 224
adverse cardiovascular effects of, 224
effects, 224i
noncardiac adverse effects of, 225
patient care guidelines for, 224–225
Verelan. See Verapamil.
V-fib. See Ventricular fibrillation.
V-tach. See Ventricular tachycardia.
VVI pacemaker mode, 184–185, 184i

W
Wandering baseline as monitor problem, 37
troubleshooting, 39t
Wandering pacemaker, 103–105
causes of, 103
characteristics of, 104, 104i
interventions for, 105
rhythm strip for, 104i
Wave deflection, current direction and, 24, 24i
Waveform interference as monitor problem, 37
troubleshooting, 38t
Weak signals as monitoring problem, 38t
Wenckebach, Karel Frederik, 158
Wolff-Parkinson-White syndrome, conduction in, 112i

XY
Xylocaine. See Lidocaine.

Z
Zone of infarction, 269–270, 269i
Zone of injury, 269i, 270
Zone of ischemia, 269i, 270

i refers to an illustration; t refers to a table.