

PACEMAKERS

Patient Information

What is a pacemaker?

An artificial pacemaker is a battery-operated device that is programmed to keep the heart beating at a certain rate. It is inserted by placing a special wire (catheter) into the right side of the heart and attaching the wire to a small, metal-covered battery that is placed just under the skin in the upper chest or sometimes in the abdomen. Insertion causes little discomfort and is done with the patient awake. The stitches are dissolvable.

Types of pacemakers

Today, many different types of pacemakers are available. The major ones are the **Demand Pacemakers** which are set to generate a beat only when they sense that the natural heartbeat is slow. When the heart is beating normally, the demand pacemaker is "on standby". Most often the demand pacemaker is set for 60 - 70 beats per minute; if your natural heartbeat slows below this number, the demand pacemaker is activated. For those patients this applies to, some newer pacemakers have a response to exercise, so the heart rate may vary.

Pacemaker batteries have to be changed. How often depends on the type of battery. Changing the battery is a simple procedure that usually does not require an overnight hospital stay. You or your doctor may begin to detect certain warning signs that the battery needs to be checked. Also, check your pulse if you have shortness of breath, dizziness or fainting, chest pain, weakness, sweating, palpitations, or prolonged hiccoughing.

Your pacemaker and your pulse (check one)

____ Your doctor has inserted a demand pacemaker. It will begin to work automatically whenever your pulse falls below ____ beats per minute. Although your pulse may increase with exercise, it should not be above ____ beats per minute while you are resting.

General care

For the first month after insertion, watch the incision site for signs of infection (pain, tenderness, swelling, redness, or drainage). Daily showers are permitted. Gently wash the area using soap and water. You may feel sore and stiff for a week or so. Gently exercising your arm, neck, and shoulders should help relax the muscles. Your doctor will tell you when you can return to work, drive a car, and exercise.

Having a pacemaker does not limit your physical activities. Most people say they can actually do more without becoming tired. Walking, playing golf, and swimming are good activities, but check with your doctor about the amount of exercise best for you. The only restriction is to avoid contact sports and any isometric activities such as lifting weights. Having a pacemaker has no effect on sexual activity.

Pacemaker precautions

1. Avoid tight-fitting clothing over the pacemaker area, which can cause irritation.
2. When you visit another doctor or dentist, be sure to tell them you have a pacemaker, since some electrical medical equipment may interfere with your pacemaker, or you may need antibiotics to prevent infections.
3. Because of possible electrical interference with pacemakers, you must take certain precautions when handling electrical equipment. Read instructions carefully for warning labels. Do not place any electrical device directly over your pacemaker. You can safely use ordinary electrical household appliances as long as they are grounded and in good working order. Most newer microwave ovens now have special shielding. Avoid use of electrical tools (such as large shop tools) or gasoline engines (lawnmowers, snowmobiles) unless they are properly grounded. Do not lean over running engines or motors.
4. You can safely operate a car, gas lawn mower, or boat as long as you do not position your pacemaker directly over the engines.
5. Avoid television-transmitting and radar stations.
6. Carry a pacemaker identification card. This lists your doctor's name, hospital, type of pacemaker, and date of implantation. The pacemaker manufacturer should send you a card. You can also wear Medic-Alert jewelry.
7. When traveling by plane, inform airport personnel that you are wearing a pacemaker before you go through metal detectors.

Notify your doctor immediately if any of the following symptoms occur:

Pulse rate faster or slower than normal at rest, chest pain, shortness of breath, dizziness or fainting, swelling of the legs and ankles, prolonged hiccoughing (more than 2 hours), elevated temperature, or drainage from the incision.