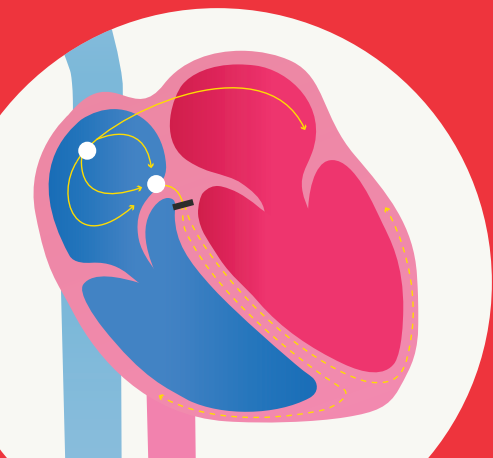


bhf.org.uk



Understanding heart block



About this booklet

This booklet can help give you the information and support to live well with heart block. It can also help your loved ones understand your condition.

It covers:

- what it means to have heart block
- how your condition is diagnosed and treated
- how to live with heart block and where to get support.

It can feel overwhelming to be given lots of information about your heart. Please use this booklet as and when you're ready. You do not have to read it all at once.



Call 0808 802 1234 (freephone)
or email hearthelpline@bhf.org.uk
Our helpline is open weekdays,
9am to 5pm (excluding
bank holidays).

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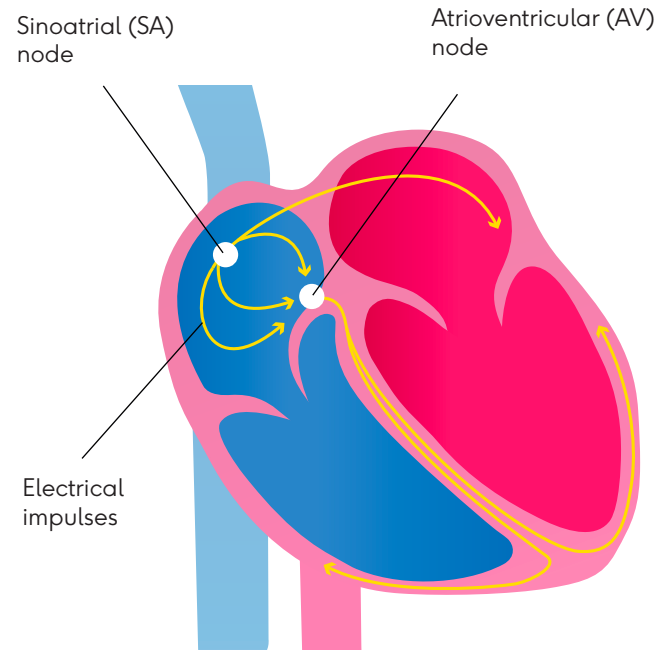
How does the heart beat?

There are electrical impulses in your heart that help it to beat regularly and in time.

The electrical impulses are sent by your sinoatrial (SA) node that sits in the top right chamber of your heart. The impulses travel across the top chambers (atria), causing them to squeeze (contract) and pump blood into the bottom chambers (ventricles).

You also have an atrioventricular (AV) node that sits between the top and bottom chambers of your heart. The AV node slows down the impulses for a very short period of time. This helps make sure your atria have enough time to pump out blood.

Watch our short animation on how your heart works at [bhf.org.uk/yourheart](https://www.bhf.org.uk/yourheart)



What is heart block?

Heart block is a condition where your heart beats too slowly or your heartbeat is not regular. It can happen if the electrical impulses (signals) in your heart are blocked or delayed.

If your heart does not beat normally then blood may not be pumped around your body as well as it should be.

Heart block is a type of abnormal heart rhythm called an arrhythmia. It's different from other types of arrhythmias, like atrial fibrillation.

You can read more about arrhythmias at [bhf.org.uk/arrhythmias](https://www.bhf.org.uk/arrhythmias)

What are the different types of heart block?

There are three types of heart block:

- atrioventricular (AV) heart block
- bundle branch heart block
- tachy-brady syndrome.

Atrioventricular (AV) heart block

AV heart block happens when the electrical impulses are delayed or blocked as they travel between the top and bottom chambers of your heart.

There are three different degrees of AV heart block:

- first-degree heart block – does not usually need treatment
- second-degree heart block – sometimes needs treatment
- third-degree or complete heart block – usually needs treatment.

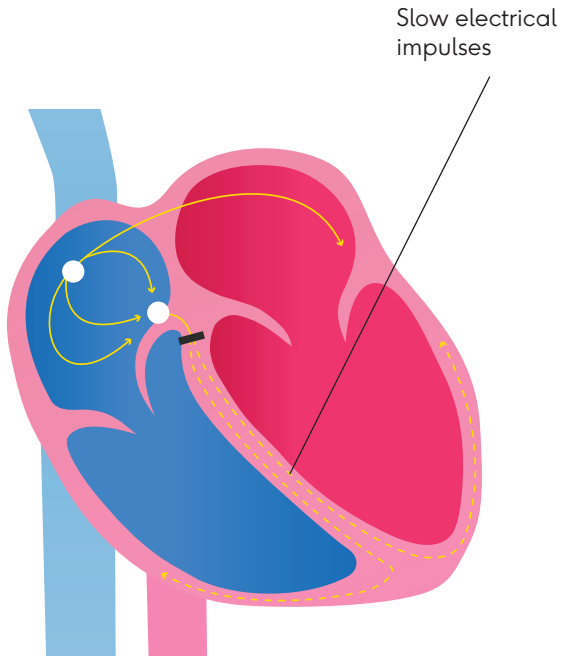
See how the three different types of AV heart block affect your heart on pages 10 to 12.

Second-degree heart block has two sub-types:

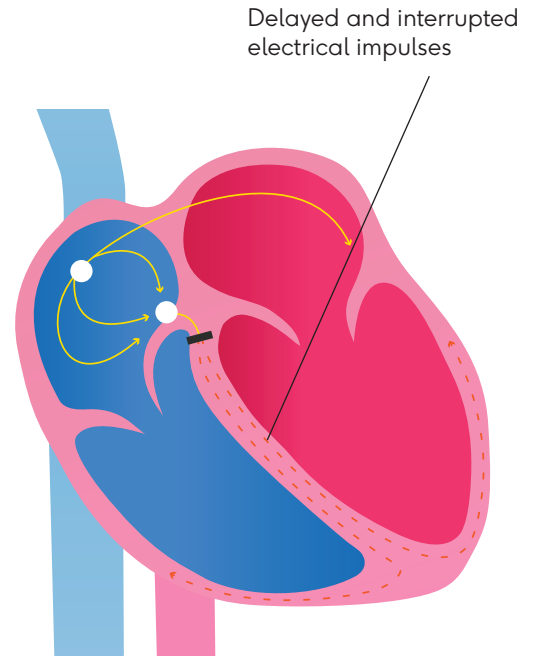
- **Mobitz type 1 (also called Wenckebach)** – the time between electrical impulses in your heart becomes longer until one is completely blocked. This causes your heart to skip a beat.
- **Mobitz type 2** – only some electrical impulses are blocked. This causes an irregular heartbeat.

For example, you can have AV heart block that's also second-degree and Mobitz type 2.

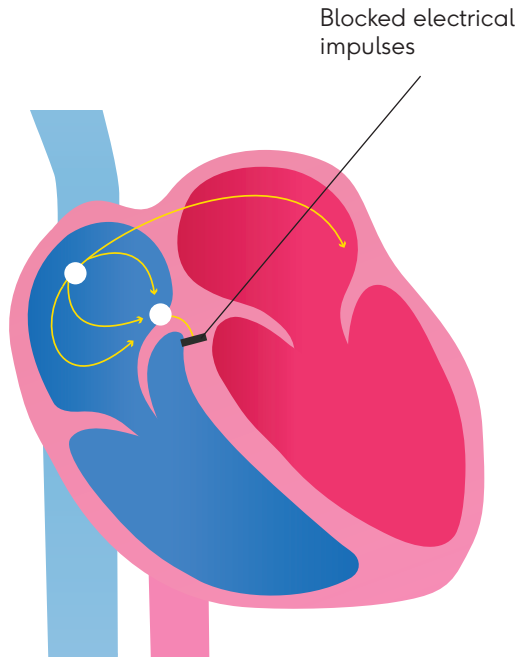
Atrioventricular heart block (first-degree)



Atrioventricular heart block (second-degree)



Atrioventricular heart block (third-degree)



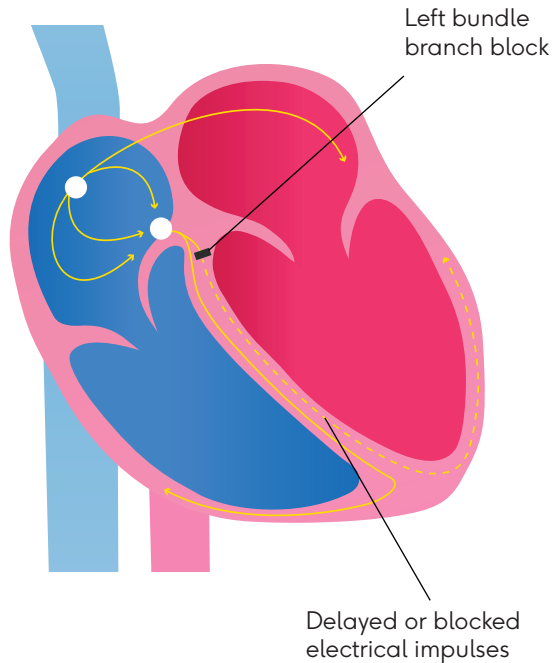
Bundle branch heart block

Bundle branch heart block is when the electrical impulses that travel through the bottom chambers of your heart are slower than normal.

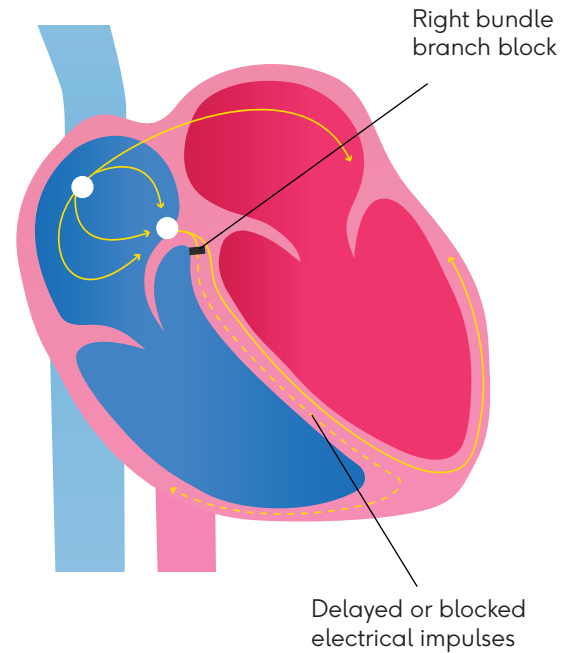
This happens because the electrical pathways that send electrical impulses to your ventricles are blocked. This block or delay can happen on either side of your heart.

See how bundle branch block affects your heart on pages 14 and 15.

Left bundle branch block is when the electrical impulses to your left ventricle get delayed or blocked.



Right bundle branch block is when the electrical impulses to your right ventricle get delayed or blocked.



Tachy-brady syndrome

Tachy-brady syndrome or sick sinus syndrome happens when your heart's sinoatrial (SA) node does not work properly.

This causes your heart to beat too fast or too slow. It can also switch between beating too quickly and too slowly.

There might also be sudden pauses in the electrical impulses in your heart, which can make you feel dizzy and lightheaded.

What are the symptoms of heart block?

Symptoms of heart block include:

- dizziness
- fainting or feeling like you're going to faint
- chest pain
- tiredness
- feeling breathless.

These symptoms can be mild to severe depending on the type of heart block you have and how it's affecting you.

Speak to your doctor if you have any of these symptoms or your symptoms are getting worse.

You can also have heart block and no symptoms. In this case heart block may be diagnosed following a routine check-up or test for other health conditions.

When to get urgent help

Call **999** if you have:

- chest pain
- feel sick, sweaty or lightheaded
- you feel like you cannot breathe, you're choking, gasping or unable to talk.

If you see someone who is unconscious, unresponsive, and not breathing normally, they may be in cardiac arrest. Call **999** for an ambulance immediately.

How do I know if I have heart block?

The first sign that you may have heart block can be an irregular heart rhythm. This can be noticed when you or a healthcare professional checks your pulse.

A normal pulse (heart rate) is steady and usually between 60 and 100 beats per minute when resting. If you have heart block it will be irregular and the beats may be different strengths.

Find out how to record your pulse on page 20.

Contact your GP if you notice that your pulse is not steady or has no set pattern. Your GP will check your pulse and may refer you for more tests (see page 22).

How to check your pulse



Step 1

Hold one arm out with your palm facing up, keeping your elbow slightly bent.

Step 2

Put the first two fingers of your other arm on the wrist of your outstretched arm, just below where your thumb connects to your wrist.

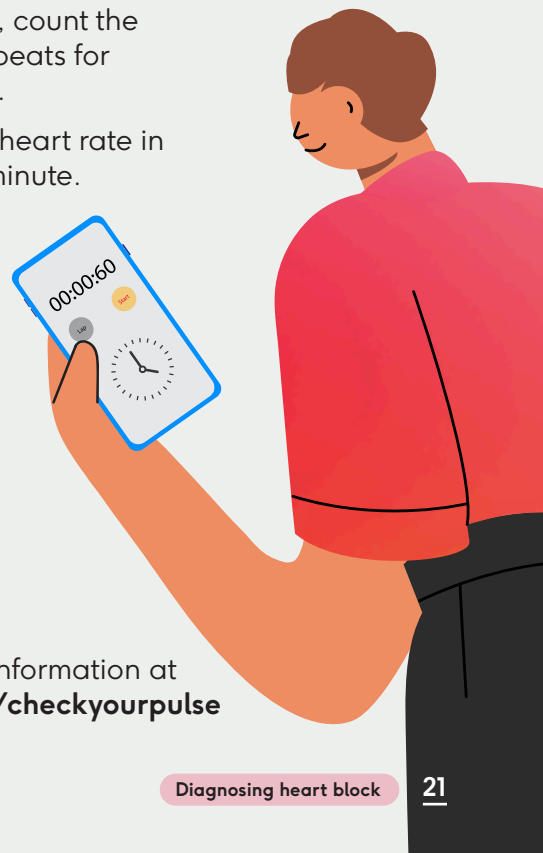
Press your fingers firmly against your skin.



Step 3

You should feel a light beat or throbbing feeling. Using a clock or timer on your phone, count the number of beats for 60 seconds.

This is your heart rate in beats per minute.



Find more information at [bhf.org.uk/checkyourpulse](https://www.bhf.org.uk/checkyourpulse)

How is heart block diagnosed?

If your pulse (heart rate) is irregular your doctor will recommend tests to find out if you have heart block.

Tests you may have include:

- an **electrocardiogram (ECG)** to look at the electrical activity of your heart
- an **echocardiogram (echo)** to take pictures of how your heart muscle is working
- a **cardiac MRI** to take pictures of the inside of your heart and blood vessels
- an **exercise stress test** to check how your heart works while you're exercising
- **blood tests.**

You may also be diagnosed while having tests for other conditions or routine health checks.

A standard ECG test takes a few minutes. You may need to have the electrical activity of your heart checked for longer. In this case you'll wear a small monitor, called a Holter monitor, for 24 hours or more.

You can go about your normal daily activities while you're wearing it. Your doctor will give you more information on what you can and cannot do.

Read about these tests on our website at **[bhf.org.uk/tests](https://www.bhf.org.uk/tests)**

Get support with your diagnosis

Being told you have a heart condition can be scary.

Talking it through can help you and your loved ones to understand your condition and what it means for you.

Find out how we can support you on page 50. You can also call our Heart Helpline to speak to one of our cardiac nurses.



Call 0808 802 1234 (freephone)
or email hearthelpline@bhf.org.uk
Our helpline is open weekdays,
9am to 5pm (excluding
bank holidays).

What causes heart block?

Heart block is usually caused by a heart condition or problems that can affect your heart's electrical system, such as:

- **Coronary heart disease** – this is when the blood supply to your heart is reduced or blocked because of a build-up of fatty material inside your coronary arteries.
- **Congenital heart disease** – this is a problem with the heart's structure that's there from birth. This means it develops in the womb, before a baby is born.
- **Cardiomyopathy** – this is a disease of the heart muscle which affects how the heart pumps blood around the body. There are different types of cardiomyopathies.

- **Medicines** – certain medicines can also cause heart block. Speak to your doctor or pharmacist if you're worried about medicines you're taking.
- **Surgical complications** – sometimes during some types of heart surgery your heart's electrical system may be affected.

Find more information on these conditions at [bhf.org.uk/conditions](https://www.bhf.org.uk/conditions)

Heart block can also happen in people with a normal heart and no obvious underlying heart problems.

Speak to your doctor for more information about the causes of heart block and your individual situation.

How is heart block treated?

Some heart blocks do not need any treatment, while others do.

The type of treatment you'll need depends on:

- what's causing your heart block
- the type of heart block you have
- whether you have symptoms.

Sometimes, making changes to your medicines or having treatment for coronary heart disease can stop heart block. Other people may need a pacemaker to treat heart block.

If you're worried about your treatment or have any questions, speak to your doctor or healthcare team. They can help answer any concerns or questions that you may have.

Will I need a pacemaker?

Some people with heart block need a pacemaker. This is more likely if you have second or third-degree (complete) heart block.

If you've got heart block that's caused by a heart attack, you may only need a temporary pacemaker while you're in hospital.

If your heartbeat does not come back to a normal heart rhythm shortly after your heart attack, you might need to have a permanent pacemaker fitted.

You may also need a pacemaker if your heart block is causing symptoms or does not respond to treatment.

What are the benefits of having a pacemaker?

Having a pacemaker can improve your quality of life.

It can help make daily activities easier, like walking up stairs or keeping active. It should also improve any symptoms like feeling breathless or dizzy.

For some people it can save their life as without it their heart would not be able to pump blood around their body as well as it should.

What is a pacemaker?

A pacemaker is a small electrical device that's put under the skin in your chest, near your collarbone.

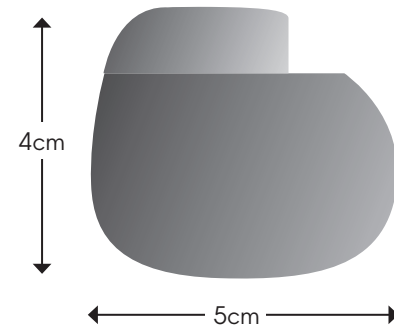
It checks your heart rhythm all the time. If it notices your heart is beating too slowly or missing heartbeats, it sends electrical signals to make your heart beat normally. It does not give your heart an electrical shock.

A pacemaker can also help your heart to pump better.

Watch our short video on pacemakers at [bhf.org.uk/pacemakers](https://www.bhf.org.uk/pacemakers)

What does a pacemaker look like?

Pacemakers are usually smaller than a matchbox, about 5cm by 4cm.



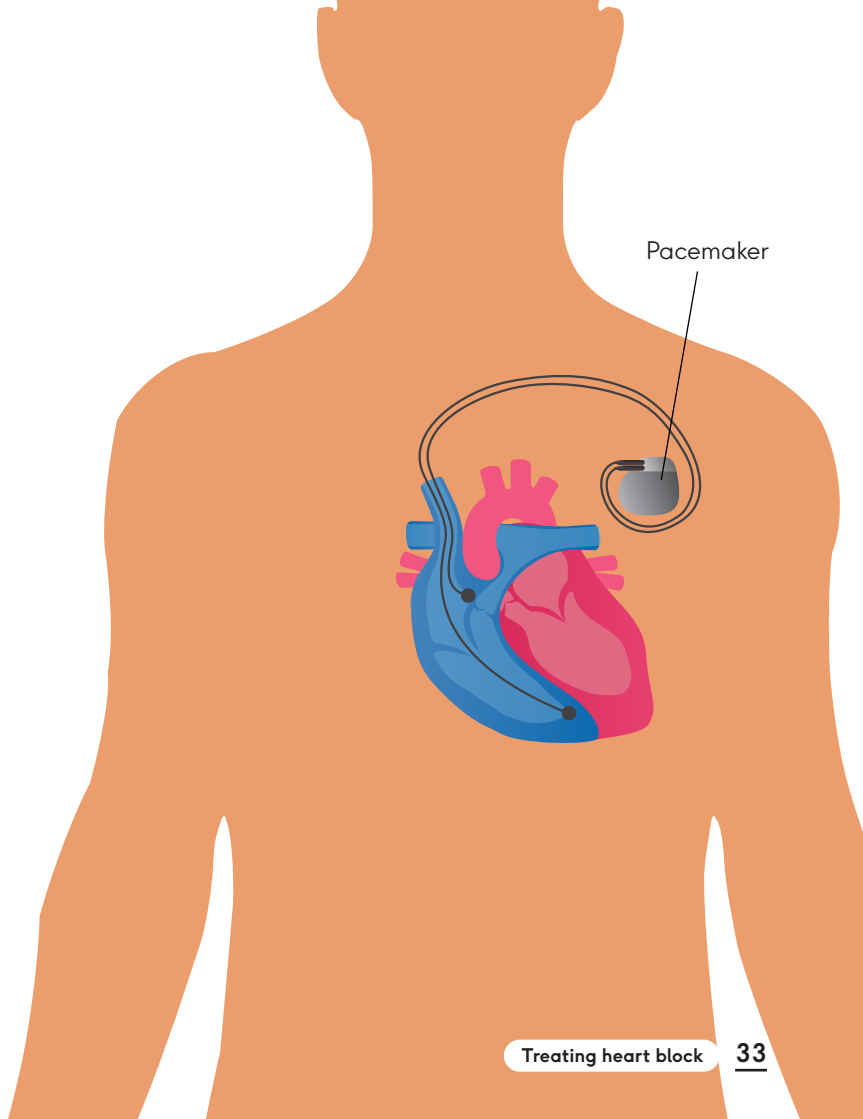
How is a pacemaker fitted?

You'll have a pacemaker fitted in hospital.

You'll be given local anaesthetic to numb the area where the pacemaker will be inserted. This means you'll be awake, but you should not feel any pain.

There are different ways to have a pacemaker fitted. The most common procedure is called transvenous implantation.

Find out more about pacemakers and how they're fitted in our booklet, **Understanding pacemakers**. Order your copy for free at [bhf.org.uk/pacemakers](https://www.bhf.org.uk/pacemakers)



Are there other treatment options?

Some people may be able to control heart block without having a pacemaker fitted. For example, you may be able to have medicine to treat heart block or treatment for the condition causing your heart block.

But this is not possible for everyone, so a pacemaker may be the best option, especially if you need emergency treatment.

Speak to your doctor to find out why they're recommending a pacemaker and if there are any alternatives.

Does heart block go away?

In some cases, having treatment for the cause of your heart block can resolve the problem. For example, if you have treatment for a heart attack or change a medicine that's causing heart block.

However, for some people it is a condition they will have for life.

By making healthy lifestyle choices (see page 38) and having treatment if you need it, you can live well with heart block.

Living with heart block

Heart block can affect your life but it's a manageable condition. With the right treatment and lifestyle, you can live well.

Speak to your healthcare team. They can answer any questions you have so you can feel in control of your condition.

You can also call our Heart Helpline to speak to our cardiac nurses.



Call 0808 802 1234 (freephone)
or email hearthelpline@bhf.org.uk
Our helpline is open weekdays,
9am to 5pm (excluding
bank holidays).

Questions to ask your doctor

If you're living with heart block, here are some questions that you may want to ask your doctor:

- What is the cause of my heart block?
- What type of heart block do I have?
- Will my condition go away on its own?
- What are my treatment options?
- Do I need to make any changes to my daily life?
- Are there things I can do to help manage my condition?
- Should I see an electrophysiologist (a special doctor for heart rhythm disorders)?

Making lifestyle changes

Simple lifestyle changes can help manage heart block.

These can include:



maintaining a healthy weight



eating a healthy, balanced diet



limiting how much alcohol you drink (under 14 units per week)



stopping smoking and the use of other tobacco products



controlling high blood pressure and high cholesterol.

Thinking about changes to your daily life can feel overwhelming. But there are lots of small changes you can make today to lower your risk.

You could commit to making one swap this week. By making lots of smaller changes you're more likely to stick to them.

Remember that small changes build up to make a big difference.

You can find lots of easy swaps in our **Understanding your heart health** booklet. Order your free copy at [bhf.org.uk/publications](https://www.bhf.org.uk/publications)

Exercise

Exercise can improve your confidence and heart health. But it's important to speak to your doctor about your individual situation and how to exercise in a safe way.

The exercise you can do will depend on the type of heart block you have and whether you:

- have symptoms
- normally exercise and at what level
- have a pacemaker
- have any other conditions.



Here are some tips for exercising with heart block:

- ✓ Build exercise up gradually over time.
- ✓ Drink lots of water to stay hydrated.
- ✓ Avoid exercising when it's very cold or very warm.
- ✓ Break your exercise up into smaller chunks so it's more manageable.
- ✓ Do a warm-up before exercise and a cool-down after.
- ✓ Stop exercising if you feel breathless, have chest pain or dizziness.

Find ways to get active with a heart condition at [bhf.org.uk/activity](https://www.bhf.org.uk/activity)



Sex

You can enjoy a healthy sex life if you have heart block.

It's normal to worry that having sex might trigger heart block, but the risk of this happening is low.

Like any exercise you do, if you feel well and listen to your body, you should be ok. Stop and rest if you start to feel unwell.

It may feel embarrassing or uncomfortable to ask questions, but healthcare professionals speak to people all the time about sex and relationships. They will be understanding and can offer you information and support.

Many people feel much better once they speak to someone.

If you prefer to look for information online, search **bhf.org.uk/sex**

Driving

Some people may need to stop driving for a short while after being diagnosed with heart block, but most people will be able to return to driving.

You can usually start driving again once your heart block has been under control for four weeks or more. If you have a pacemaker you will need to stop driving for one week after having it fitted.

It's important not to drive if your condition stops you from being able to safely stop or control a car.

You need to tell the DVLA and your car insurance provider about your condition.

Talk to your doctor and the DVLA about your individual situation and driving.

You can find more information on driving, including options if you cannot drive, at **bhf.org.uk/driving**

Seatbelt tip

If you find wearing a seatbelt is painful after having a pacemaker fitted, try putting a soft jumper or small pillow between your chest and the seatbelt.



Holidays and flying

Most people with heart block can go on holiday.

If your condition is controlled and you feel well, it should be ok. You should check with your doctor that you are fit enough to travel.

Most modern airport security scanners are safe for your pacemaker. But you may want to carry your pacemaker identification card or a doctor's note in case you need it.

Tips for holidays and flying:

- Take enough medicine to last your holiday.
- Pack medicines you need in your hand luggage.
- Take a list of the medicines you're taking in case you need to get more.
- Look up where your closest pharmacy and hospital are in case you need them.
- Let your travel insurance provider know about your diagnosis.
- Know the emergency numbers of the country you're travelling to.

Get more information on holidays and flying at [bhf.org.uk/holidays](https://www.bhf.org.uk/holidays)

Travel and life insurance

If you're diagnosed with heart block and you have travel or life insurance, you need to tell your life and travel insurance provider.

Many people can live well with heart block by making lifestyle changes and taking medicine. But it's important to make sure your insurance provider knows about your condition in case you need to make a claim in the future.

Find out more about travel and life insurance at [bhf.org.uk/practicalsupport](https://www.bhf.org.uk/practicalsupport)

Checking your heart rate at home

Wearable devices and smartphone apps to monitor your heart rate are becoming more popular.

While some people find it reassuring to be able to regularly check their heart rate, other people may feel more anxious and check their heart rate more often than needed.

It's important to know that they may not be as accurate as professional equipment.

Speak to your healthcare team before using them.

Worries about your health

It's normal to feel worried or anxious about your health. But sometimes, this can get in the way of living your life.

If you feel anxious and sad a lot of the time, and it's affecting your daily life, talk to your GP.

Do not be afraid to ask for help. Sometimes you need to put yourself first.

You can refer yourself to the NHS for talking therapies, like cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) or counselling. Search '**NHS talking therapies**' for more information.

You can also get in touch with Mind, a charity offering support to anyone affected by their mental health. Visit **mind.org.uk**

Get support

Being diagnosed with a heart condition can feel scary. Many people with heart block can live well with their condition.

There are places you can go to ask questions and get support.

Call the Heart Helpline

If you or your family are affected by heart block, our cardiac nurses can help you with your questions or concerns.

Call **0808 802 1234** (freephone) or email **hearthelpline@bhf.org.uk**
Our helpline is open weekdays, 9am to 5pm (excluding bank holidays).

You can also speak to our nurses using the live chat feature. Find out more at **bhf.org.uk/helpline**

Join Heart Matters

Discover the benefits of Heart Matters, your free heart-health membership.

Join to receive our free magazine or email newsletter, featuring expert tips, heart-healthy recipes, inspiring stories, and the latest updates backed by BHF-funded science.

Guided by our team of experts, Heart Matters helps you to make small changes for a healthier heart.

bhf.org.uk/heartmatters

Order our information

We have lots of information about living with a heart condition and looking after your heart health.



You can read and order our booklets for free at [bhf.org.uk/publications](https://www.bhf.org.uk/publications)

We also have information in audio, easy read, braille and other languages. Read or listen to our information online at [bhf.org.uk/infoforall](https://www.bhf.org.uk/infoforall)

Have your say

We want people with lived experience of cardiovascular disease to be involved in everything we do.

Join Heart Voices, our patient and public involvement (PPI) network. The network can connect you with opportunities to take part in our lifesaving work.

By getting involved, you'll have the chance to share your insights with us and build connections with people who have been through similar experiences to you.

Join the network at [bhf.org.uk/heart-voices](https://www.bhf.org.uk/heart-voices)

We are British Heart Foundation



Through research, information and support we're here for everyone affected by cardiovascular disease.

Get help

Speak to one of our experienced cardiac nurses for more information and support. They can help answer your questions, big or small.

You can call **0808 802 1234** (freephone). Our helpline is open weekdays, 9am to 5pm (excluding bank holidays).

Support our work

If you've found this information helpful and would like to support our work, please scan the QR code or visit bhf.org.uk/support-us



Scan here with
the camera
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