



## Heart Palpitations During Perimenopause: Are They Normal?

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In 2015, Kathy Ocker Meyer, MD, of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, was in good health—who was an end-of-life resuscitation care team lead at a local hospital—when she started experiencing heart palpitations. At first, they were occasional and temporary, but as they continued, they became more frequent and intense. After several months, she was diagnosed with perimenopause. But it wasn't until she experienced several episodes in her sleep that Kathy started to worry about her heart.



"It was only a little flutter in my chest at first, and then it became more bothersome," Kathy recalls. "One time I felt like I had a car crash—total light." When her morning heart became worse, she decided to seek help. Her primary care doctor referred her to a cardiologist, and she began a 12-lead electrocardiogram (ECG) and a continuous sleep-taping device to track high blood pressure as well as an unexplained heartbeat.

Although Kathy's story and course of treatment might be unique, the heart palpitations she experienced during menopause are not.

### Why Are Women Experiencing Palpitations in Midlife?

Janet Carpenter, PhD, is a professor at the Indiana University School of Nursing, Indianapolis, and also the lead researcher on a study investigating menopausal palpitations in women by analyzing data from almost 100,000 women's health records. According to her research, somewhere between 40 percent and 50 percent of women in perimenopause or menopause have reported strange sensations in their hearts.

"Women in midlife tend to describe them as rapid, fluttering, racing, or skipped heartbeats," says [Wendy Goldberg, MD](#), a clinical assistant professor at the Mayo Clinic's Center for Mind-Body and Cardiology who sees women with this issue in her office with some frequency.

Because the language can vary, "It's not always clear they are describing the same thing," Carpenter says. What seems clear is that many women are experiencing something strange in their hearts, and there's not enough research currently to show why this is happening.

"We are careful to call them 'palpitations' during the menopause transition" because we don't know they are directly affecting the myocardium," says Carpenter, who became interested in the topic after noticing her own middle-age experience with heart palpitations. After seeing her doctor, they were often in and out of any cardiac heart tests, but the experience made it clear to her that these symptoms are palpitations consistent in a midlife.

**The Heart During Menopause**  
It's possible that the hormonal changes in the body during menopause may be part of the cause of palpitations, though Goldberg is careful to say that it's not estrogen alone that could be at fault. "So all of the hormonal fluctuations in perimenopause or menopause" are each.

During menopause, the body changes in many ways. Weight gain is common. Hot flashes are common. Losing sleep is common. The entire "ecosystem" of the body shifts, Goldberg explains. These changes can—and often do—lead to palpitations that may be on their own, she says.

[Tara Davis, MD](#), a Denver-based ob-gyn who specializes in women's wellness, shares her perspective: "There aren't any one reproductive event, such as ovulation, that causes heart palpitations, such as irregular periods, or hot flashes, or dry eye." "The loss of estrogen may play a part in different ways, but there are estrogen receptors in the heart. One of them, specifically, generally improves [smoothly] because a woman's body gets used to having estrogen levels that are not as high."

The good news is that the heart itself may be perfectly healthy, even when the sensation feels scary. "It's a panic kind of thing, they might not have an increased heart rate while they're having an episode," says [Michael Tuzi, MD](#), a heart specialist at the University of Michigan. As Carpenter puts it, "It's a little alarming we don't know more about what this is, considering how many women experience it."

### When to Call the Doctor

It's always smart to consult with a medical professional on any recurring change you experience, regardless of how small they may seem. A heart flutter that lasts for more than a few days is cause for concern, especially if it persists.

"If you're sitting at your desk, you get a flutter, and it goes away, it's not something to worry about," Tuzi says. "But if it's associated with chest pain and is radiating to your arm, that's different."

In Carpenter's research, she was able to find a link between the palpitations and other risk factors for cardiovascular health, like "sleep disturbance, depression, and grief" and women's previous work experience in menopause. It's important to pay attention to any other symptoms you're experiencing, too. Anxiety, nervousness, and fatigue that accompany palpitations can be another reason to head to see the doctor in person, Tuzi says. You may be able to treat the underlying issue and potentially stop the palpitations in the process.

Additionally, it's important to note that the signs of potential heart disease are different in women than in men. As with men, women may experience the subtle signs of a heart attack: chest pain and sudden dizziness that are the most common signs. However, women may also experience shortness of breath, sweating, and nausea, and back or jaw pain, according to the American Heart Association. Any of these symptoms accompanying heart palpitations should cause you to seek immediate medical attention.

Generally, it's good to seek medical attention to discuss any symptoms involving your heart health, such as dizziness, shortness of breath, or anything else that feels abnormal or out of sync with your doctor or an ongoing health issue. It's worth noting that if you're pregnant, even if it doesn't feel like an emergency, Tuzi says, it's still worth bringing up to your next physical.

### A Heart-Healthy Lifestyle Can Help During Menopause

When a woman comes to her doctor concerned about palpitations, Goldberg says she first asks how much caffeine the patient is drinking, how much sleep they're getting, whether there are other symptoms, such as dizziness or fatigue, or whether there's interference with daily activities. She then asks about recent weight changes and about any emergency situations with the heart, if there's no other explanation for the heart palpitations, that she recommends lifestyle changes.

"One of the first things I ask about is caffeine," Goldberg says. "The palpitations can often be resolved just by drinking a cup fewer of coffee per day."

There are other things she asks that can affect heart health, such as smoking, for instance. Luckily, that's easy to track for a moment or take a cigarette with a second if that's not your thing, says Tuzi. "Smoking is a huge predictor of more symptoms or events," he says. For his patients with palpitations, he recommends tobacco cessation, but he says he's not an expert on that.

### How Diet Can Affect Heart Palpitations

Of course, diet is a vital part of heart health, so it's not surprising that eating habits may have contributed to more than 300,000 cardiovascular deaths in U.S. adults in 2010, according to the findings of a study published in the journal *AMA* in 2011 that focused on a review of diet data. (These deaths were not from heart disease alone—they also included stroke and Type 2 diabetes.)

According to Tuzi, eating nutrient-dense foods, such as whole grains, nuts, fruits, legumes, and healthy fats, is also a major part of any heart health strategy. "It's a big part of food as medicine," he says. Tuzi strongly pushes that, whenever possible, people get their nutrients through the food they eat rather than by taking supplements. However, a nutrient supplement may help women who aren't getting enough of the nutrient through food, he says.

Another relevant study was done in 2016 by a group, including the study published in the *Journal of Alternative Medicine* in 2016, whose authors of 42 may help slow arterial calcification and stiffening and protect heart health for women. It also recommends the intake recommended by the National Institutes of Health Office of Dietary Supplements.

It's possible to get this nutrient from food, however, given that the amount found in half a cup of banana is 100 milligrams. It's also recommended before you start any new supplements to check in with your doctor on any potential interactions with other medications.

### Other Factors

Smoking is also a major cardiovascular risk factor. Quitting is possibly the most beneficial heart health change a woman can make.

In addition, stress is also an issue. On your own and about sleep are both linked to greater cardiovascular risk. In her practice, Goldberg says sleep is something she's called when it comes to these palpitations, and since "sleep is often disrupted in perimenopause, we may see this more often in women at this stage of life." The symptoms of her patients get better when they've had more hours of sleep every night.

"The heart body is a lot," Tuzi says. "It has four valves, so you need a good diet, you need to exercise, you need to reduce your stress, and you need mental support and spiritual support."

Carpenter points out that women like Kathy who have been on breast cancer drugs like tamoxifen also tend to report higher instances of heart palpitations for reasons that are not yet clear.

### The Search for More Answers

There's still much research left to be done, says Carpenter, who is actively involved with another study on heart palpitations in midlife. "This study will explore and test specific symptoms that women present with in general," she says. "We see this in cardiology. This is a hotbed issue."

Carpenter is planning to do ECG work on women who experience palpitations. She intends to dig deeper into what's going on when they feel this sensation in their chest, and she hopes to get some answers.

### The Take-Home on Heart Palpitations in Perimenopause and Menopause

The take-home is that palpitations can be common in the perimenopausal period. It's unclear if they're related to a drop in estrogen or other the symptoms this can cause, such as loss of sleep, mood changes, and stress. In any case, it's important to be aware of the symptoms and check in with your doctor regularly about what you're experiencing and general heart health.

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