Premature Ventricular Contraction (PVC)

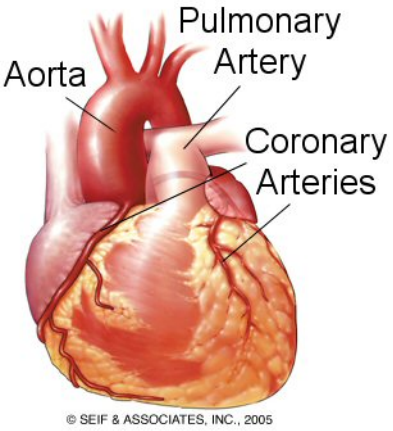
Premature ventricular contraction (PVC) is an irregularity of the heart rhythm involving extra or skipped heartbeats. In some cases, they may occur without obvious cause or heart disease.

Other times, they can be caused by an electrolyte change in the blood. These need to be corrected. They can also be seen when there is not enough oxygen going to the heart. A common cause of this is plaque or cholesterol buildup. This buildup decreases the blood supply to the heart. In addition, extra beats may be caused or aggravated by:

- Excessive smoking.
- Alcohol consumption.
- Caffeine
- Certain medications
- Some street drugs.

SYMPTOMS

- The sensation of feeling your heart skipping a beat (*palpitations*).
- In many cases, the person may have no symptoms.



SIGNS AND TESTS

- A physical examination may show an occasional irregularity, but if the PVC beats do not happen often, they may not be found on physical exam.
- Blood pressure is usually normal.
- Other tests that may find extra beats of the heart are:
  - An EKG (electrocardiogram)
  - A Holter monitor which can monitor your heart over longer periods of time
  - An Angiogram (study of the heart arteries).

TREATMENT

Usually extra heartbeats do not need treatment. The condition is treated only if symptoms are severe or if extra beats are very frequent or are causing problems. An underlying cause, if discovered, may also require treatment. Treatment may also be needed if there may be a risk for other more serious cardiac arrhythmias.

PREVENTION

- Moderation in caffeine, alcohol, and tobacco use may reduce the risk of ectopic heartbeats in some people.
- Exercise often helps people who lead a *sedentary* (inactive) lifestyle.

PROGNOSIS

PVC heartbeats are generally harmless and do not need treatment.

COMPLICATIONS

- Ventricular tachycardia (occasionally).
- There usually are no complications.
- Other arrhythmias (occasionally).

SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL CARE IF:

- You feel palpitations that are frequent or continual.
- You develop chest pain or other problems such as shortness of breath, sweating, or nausea and vomiting.
- You become light-headed or faint (pass out).
- You get worse or do not improve with treatment.

Document Released: 08/04/2005 Document Re-Released: 09/26/2009
ExitCare® Patient Information ©2011 ExitCare, LLC.