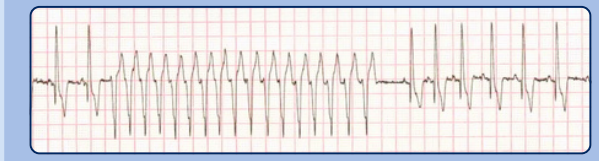
What does an **irregular rhythm** mean for my pet?

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WHAT IS AN IRREGULAR RHYTHM?

The normal heartbeat is controlled by electrical signals that make the heart contract and relax in a **regular**, **coordinated** way.

Changes or irregularities to the normal rhythm (an **arrhythmia**) can include **extra** (ectopic) heartbeats or a different rhythm which causes the heart to beat **too quickly** or **too slowly**.



WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Some arrhythmias cause **clinical signs** such as collapse. Rhythms which are too fast or too slow can cause heart **enlargement** and eventual heart **failure**. Some are associated with an increased risk of **sudden death**. Some arrhythmias can be **inherited**.

WHAT COULD BE CAUSING IT?

*Some irregular rhythms can be a **normal** feature of a **healthy** heart!*

Other causes can be broadly divided into:

- Primary arrhythmias: problems with the **heart's own electrical signals**
- Arrhythmias caused by **structural changes in the heart** (e.g. chamber enlargement, heart muscle disease or cardiac masses)
- Arrhythmias caused by **non-cardiac disease**, such as hormone disorders, neurological changes, respiratory disease, abdominal issues, pain or even reactions to medications or toxins

HOW DO WE INVESTIGATE?

We cannot know the rhythm just from listening with a stethoscope.

We make a diagnosis with an **ECG**, either:

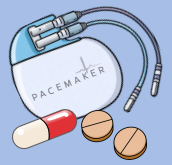
- In the clinic
- By fitting your pet with a monitor (a **Holter**) to wear at home which records every heartbeat, for analysis afterwards.

WILL MY PET NEED TREATMENT?

Not always! Treatment choice depends on:

- What the rhythm is
- The underlying cause of arrhythmia
- How the rhythm is affecting the heart
- Whether we need to control clinical signs.

We usually treat with medication, but some rhythms require a pacemaker – just like humans!



WHAT SIGNS SHOULD I LOOK OUT FOR?

Not all patients have clinical signs!
Symptoms that can be associated with irregular rhythms include:

- Reduced exercise tolerance
- Breathlessness / increased respiratory rate
- Weakness / collapse / abnormal behaviour
- Abdominal swelling
- Seizure-like episodes
- Destabilisation of patients with known heart disease

It is important to seek advice from your vet if you have any concerns.
A diary of events or video can be really helpful.

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