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SURGERY TO TREAT HEART ARRHYTHMIAS

A guide for patients

THE HEART'S NORMAL RHYTHM

The heart beats in a regular, organised way that is controlled by its own electrical system. Tiny electrical impulses are produced in a small area of the right atrium known as the sinus node. The impulses make the right and left atria contract at the same time to pump blood into the ventricles. The impulses then travel to the ventricles through the atrioventricular (AV) node and cause the ventricles to contract, pumping blood to the lungs, brain and rest of the body. The heart's normal rhythm is known as sinus rhythm.

HEART ARRHYTHMIAS

An arrhythmia is an abnormal, or irregular, heart rhythm. Arrhythmias are caused by a problem with the heart's electrical system. Instead of coming from the sinus node, electrical impulses may be coming from another part of the heart, or they may be coming from the sinus node but moving to the ventricles via an unusual path. There are many types of heart arrhythmias. Some have serious health consequences. Doctors use different treatment methods depending on whether the arrhythmias are fast (tachycardia) or slow (bradycardia).

Atrial fibrillation (AF): The most common type of serious heart arrhythmia is atrial fibrillation (AF), which affects one or two people in every 100. The incidence of AF increases with age. It is common in people with other heart conditions such as coronary artery disease or heart valve disease.

AF is an irregular, fast heart rhythm caused by disorganised electrical impulses conducted from the atria to the rest of the heart. These disorganised impulses cause the heart's rhythm to be erratic and reduce the heart's ability to pump blood effectively to the rest of the body. AF increases the risk of stroke and other heart conditions, such as congestive heart failure and heart attack. The risks can be reduced with treatment to return the heart to normal sinus rhythm.

AF can occur in short, temporary episodes of up to seven days at a time (paroxysmal AF) or it may be present for most or all of the time (persistent or long-standing persistent AF).

SURGICAL ABLATION

Surgical ablation is a procedure that aims to restore normal sinus rhythm in patients with AF. Surgeons use an energy source, usually radiofrequency (RF) energy or cryoenergy (freezing), to block the specific origins

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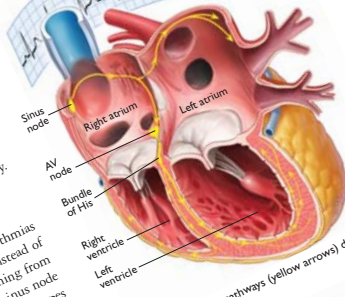
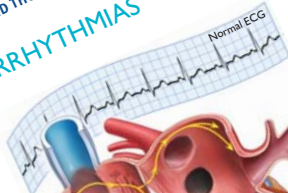
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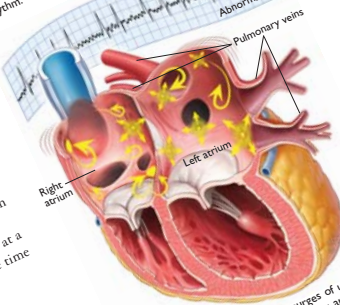
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The heart's electrical pathways (yellow arrows) during normal sinus rhythm.



In atrial fibrillation, surges of uncontrolled, chaotic electrical impulses (yellow arrows) travel through the atria starting from the pulmonary veins. These impulses cause the atria to fibrillate. Some impulses travel to the ventricles and cause a fast irregular heartbeat.

YOUR SURGEON

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For the benefit of Fellows and their patients, the ANZSCTS has produced a new patient education pamphlet "Surgery to Treat Heart Arrhythmias". A copy is enclosed for your perusal. This pamphlet and the Society's patient education pamphlets on CABG surgery and heart valve surgery have been developed in response to the need to provide treatment information for patients. All of the RACS patient education pamphlets have undergone thorough editorial review to ensure accuracy and suitability of the text and illustrations. As the community has become more insistent about being informed about surgical procedures, these pamphlets can help to assist the informed-consent process and enhance communications with patients. These patient education pamphlets are not intended to replace discussions between surgeons and their patients, but to complement them.

Send me a sample pack of the RACS patient education pamphlets and the RACS normal anatomy leaflets.

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