

Beta Blockers:

Treatment for people with inherited arrhythmias

What is an inherited arrhythmia?

An arrhythmia is an abnormal heartbeat, either too fast or too slow. If your heartbeat is abnormal, your heart cannot pump blood properly. Arrhythmias can happen for many reasons.

Some conditions that cause arrhythmias are inherited.

This means they can run in families.



Some people with arrhythmias never have symptoms.

In a small number of people, arrhythmias can cause serious medical events such as:

- sudden fainting or 'blacking out'
- seizures ('fits')
- cardiac arrest (a condition where the heart stops beating suddenly)

What are beta blockers?



Beta blockers are drugs used to treat many types of heart conditions. Beta blockers help keep your heart beating at a steady pace, even in situations that might normally make your heart rate increase. During exercise and when you feel stressed, excited or scared, your body produces a hormone called adrenaline. Adrenaline makes your heart beat faster.

Beta blockers work by blocking the effect of adrenaline.

How do beta blockers help people with inherited arrhythmias?

These conditions may cause arrhythmias at times when a person is exercising or under stress. These arrhythmias can lead to serious medical events. Because beta blockers block the effect of adrenaline, they lower the risk of a serious event.

Beta blockers are usually a pill taken every day. Some examples are nadolol, bisoprolol, metoprolol, and propranolol. The heart rhythm specialists in the BC Inherited Arrhythmia Program will prescribe a specific type and dose of beta blocker based on your needs.

These doctors are cardiologists (heart doctors) who specialize in heart rhythm problems. They are also referred to as electrophysiologists.

Precautions



It is dangerous to stop taking your beta blocker without talking to your doctor. It is also dangerous to change your dose unless your doctor tells you to change.



If you stop the medication suddenly, you may place yourself at a high risk for an arrhythmia. If you miss your daily dose, take it later in the day when you remember. If you miss several doses, start taking your beta blocker again right away. Call your doctor for more instructions. Your doctor can help you make a plan to take the medication regularly.



Before starting the beta blocker, talk to your doctor about using alcohol, prescription, non-prescription and recreational drugs.

Side effects

Some of the more common side effects include:

- fatigue (tiredness)
- low heart rate
- worsened asthma
- changes in mood

Other side effects are possible, but most people do not feel them. Most people find that the side effects get better with time as their body adjusts. This usually takes 1 to 2 months.

What to expect when you start taking a beta blocker

On the day of your appointment, the heart rhythm specialist may speak to you about starting a beta blocker. Ask about any concerns or questions you have.

It can take some time for the body to adjust to the beta blocker. Your doctor may prescribe a smaller dose to start and then gradually increase your medication to the goal dose. Because everyone is different, your doctor will give you specific instructions.

When you start taking the beta blocker, you may have less energy. It is important to continue taking the medication, even if you feel this way. The feeling of tiredness gets better for most people as their body gets used to the medication.

If you have concerns about your medication, feel that it is not working properly, or are having any side effects, please contact your heart rhythm specialist or family doctor as soon as possible to discuss these. Please call your inherited arrhythmia clinic (numbers on back page) if you have questions.



Testing how the beta blocker is working

The exercise treadmill test is one way to measure how well the beta blocker is working. This test also can help us find the best dose. We ask most patients to do an exercise treadmill test about 6 weeks after starting the beta blocker or after any change in the dose that has been prescribed.

Changing your medication

Sometimes the heart rhythm specialist will recommend a change in your beta blocker or the dose you are taking. It is important to give your body time to adjust. It is dangerous to stop taking your beta blocker without talking to your doctor. It is also dangerous to change your dose unless your doctor tells you to change.

Please use the table below to write down the instructions for changing your medicine.

	Beta blocker name	Dose (how much to take)	Duration (how long to take it)
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			

New Prescriptions

Whenever possible, please arrange for prescription renewals through your family doctor. Your heart rhythm specialist will tell you if you need to do something different to renew your prescription.



Questions?

Talk to your family doctor, your pharmacist or your inherited arrhythmia clinic. Contact information is below.

Vancouver:

BC Inherited Arrhythmia Office
St. Paul's Hospital
204-1033 Davie St.
Vancouver, BC V6E 1M7
Phone: 604-682-2344 ext. 66765
Fax : 604-806-9474

Vancouver:

BC Children's Hospital
Attention Dr. Shubhayan Sanatani
Children's Heart Centre
Rm 1F3 - 4480 Oak Street,
Vancouver, BC V6H 3V4
Phone: 604-875-2295

Victoria:

Island Medical Genetics Program
1 Hospital Way
Victoria, BC V8Z 6R5
Phone: 250-727-4461

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