



ELECTRICAL CARADIOVERSION

■ WHAT IS ELECTRICAL CARADIOVERSION?

Electrical cardioversion is a procedure to make your heart beat normally by passing an electric shock through the chest to the heart. Cardioversion is used most often to treat atrial fibrillation, but is also used to treat life-threatening ventricular arrhythmias. The single, rapid, high-voltage electric shock to the heart causes all the heart muscle cells to stop beating for a moment. This allows your heart to restart itself with a normal heart rhythm.

■ WHEN IS IT USED?

Abnormal heart rhythms (arrhythmias), such as atrial tachycardia and ventricular tachycardia, may cause very rapid heart rates. The heart rate may be so fast that the blood does not circulate well. For some people with coronary artery or heart valve disease, this fast heartbeat may be life threatening. Cardioversion can quickly restore normal circulation.

Some other rhythm problems, such as atrial flutter or atrial fibrillation, are not very fast but are abnormal and inefficient. If you are having problems because of the abnormal heart rhythm, your doctor might suggest treatment to return the heart rhythm to normal. Medicine is sometimes used to try to return the heart to a normal rhythm. When drugs don't work, your doctor might suggest cardioversion.

■ HOW DO I PREPARE FOR ELECTRICAL CARADIOVERSION?

If the arrhythmia is life-threatening, cardioversion is done without delay or special preparation.

For a planned cardioversion, follow your doctor's instructions. In general, patients should:

- Eat a light meal, such as soup or salad, the night before the procedure. Do not eat or drink anything after midnight and the morning before the procedure. You may take your medications with sips of water.
- Consult with your doctor about which medications you should take and which you should hold.
- Bring a list of all the medications you are taking and their dose with you to the hospital.
- Make arrangements for someone to drive you to and from the hospital.

■ WHAT HAPPENS DURING THE PROCEDURE?

An IV will be started and you will be given a light general anesthetic, which will put you to sleep. Your doctor will put electrodes on your chest and back and deliver an electric shock through your chest for a fraction of a second. The electrical charge passes through two large, hand-held electrode paddles or two

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large adhesive patches placed on your chest. Abnormal heart rhythms usually return to normal with the first shock, but more shocks may be needed. Your doctor will check your heart rhythm with an electrocardiogram.

You will probably be unconscious from the anesthesia for less than 5 minutes and will not remember the shock. You will not feel any pain during the procedure.

■ WHAT HAPPENS AFTER THE PROCEDURE?

You will be monitored in the recovery area for a short time. When you are fully recovered from the anesthesia, you will probably be allowed to go home. Sometimes you may need to stay in the hospital overnight. Your doctor may prescribe drugs to help your heart keep its new rhythm.

Your chest might be a little sore and have red ring-like marks where the electrode paddles were placed. These marks will fade after a few days.

■ WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF THIS PROCEDURE?

- Cardioversion is a very effective procedure to return your heart rhythm back to a normal. Effective cardioversion can reduce your symptoms and eliminate extra workload for your heart
- The procedure has fewer complications than treatment with most drugs

■ WHAT ARE THE RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH THIS PROCEDURE?

- Light general anesthesia carries a small risk, but harmful reactions rarely occur.
- The procedure may not be successful and your heart rhythm may not change
- You may develop a small area of burn of your skin where the paddles were placed
- A blood clot may become dislodged from the heart and cause a stroke

Ask your doctor how these risks apply to you.

■ WHEN SHOULD I CALL MY DOCTOR?

Call your doctor right away if your heart rhythm becomes irregular or very rapid. Symptoms of a change in your heart rhythm are:

- shortness of breath;
- chest pain or discomfort;
- palpitations;
- dizziness; or
- fainting spells.