

Atrial ectopic beats

What are atrial ectopic beats?

Occasionally when a baby's heart is listened to, or seen on scan, an irregular rhythm is noticed. This is most often caused by little extra beats, which are of no significance to the baby.

Why do they occur?

A small area in the heart regulates the normal heartbeat by sending out electrical pulses. These pulses spread throughout the heart muscle and cause it to contract in a regular rhythm. Sometimes however, another area in the heart sends out an extra electrical pulse, which in turn causes an extra early heartbeat. There is then a resting gap while the heart muscle gets back into the regular rhythm.

Is my baby's heart normal?

We have scanned your baby's heart today and found that there are no obvious abnormalities with the structure or function of the heart.

Will these cause problems in the pregnancy?

We would expect the irregular heartbeat to settle down as the pregnancy progresses. Your community midwife will check the baby's heartbeat once a week because, very rarely, the baby's heartbeat may develop into a rapid rhythm (tachycardia). If this is left untreated this could make the baby unwell. The process of becoming unwell takes much longer than one week, so weekly checks are adequate and safe.

What happens if the baby's heartbeat becomes very fast?

Although this is rare (1 or 2 cases in 100), if this did occur, medication is offered to the mother to correct this.

Will the baby need any special care after birth?

If the ectopic beats are no longer present before the birth, there is no need for any further tests and your care in labour will be the same as anyone else. If the ectopic beats are still present, we recommend that the baby is checked by a paediatrician (baby doctor). They may arrange a simple electrical recording of the heart (electrocardiogram or ECG). This is a painless test and only takes a few seconds. For this reason, it is advisable to deliver the baby in hospital to ensure these checks are carried out promptly. The paediatrician would advise further if any extra tests are required.

Any questions?

If you have any further questions or concerns, please speak to a member of the Fetal medicine staff on 01872 252682, or your own community midwife/GP.

If you would like this leaflet in large print, braille, audio version or in another language, please contact the General Office on 01872 252690