Heart Foundation

You and your pacemaker

What is a pacemaker?

A pacemaker is a small device that helps to increase your heartbeat if it's slow or beats unevenly (irregularly). Most pacemakers have two main parts:

- A long-lasting battery and an electronic circuit in a metal case that sits under the skin on your chest.
- One or more leads (thin wires). These connect the pacemaker to your heart muscle.

A new type of pacemaker, without leads, has also been recently developed.

A pacemaker is small enough to sit in the palm of your hand

Why do I need a pacemaker?

Some heart conditions make your heartbeat slow or uneven (irregular). This can cause light-headedness, tiredness, shortness of breath or fainting. A pacemaker can help relieve these symptoms. For some people a pacemaker can save their life.

How a pacemaker works

Your pacemaker sends a small electrical signal to your heart when it's beating too slowly or unevenly. This signal tells your heart when to beat. When your heart beats normally, the pacemaker doesn't send any signals.

Modern pacemakers are very reliable and comfortable.

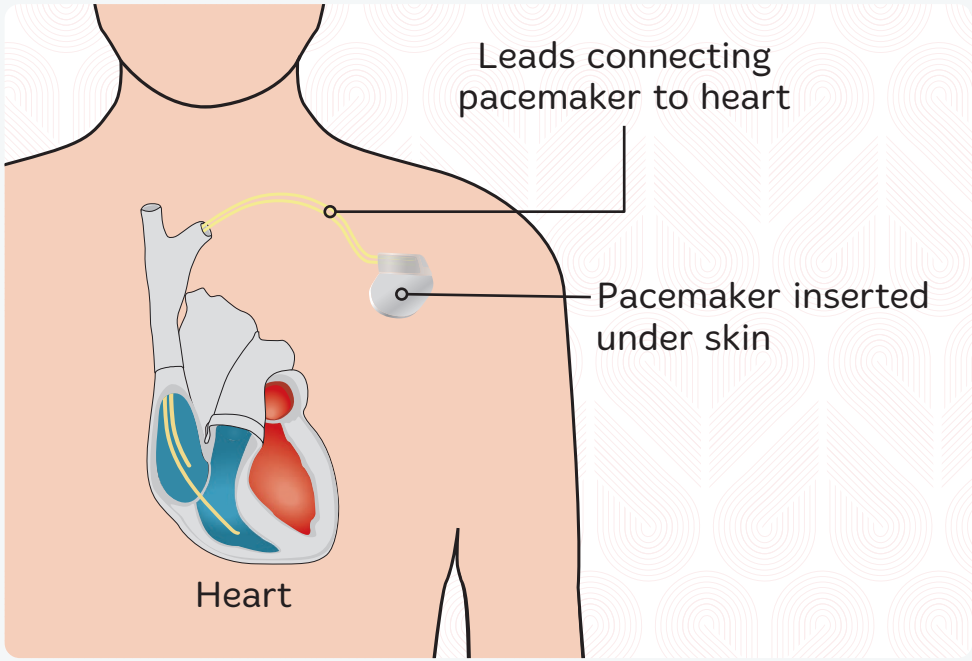
How is a pacemaker fitted (implanted)?

Your pacemaker will be fitted in hospital. You'll be awake, but you'll be given medication to help you relax. You will also get an injection to numb the area, so you shouldn't feel any pain.

It usually takes about an hour. You will be in hospital for a day or overnight. You'll need someone to drive you home.

You may feel some pressure but shouldn't feel any pain when your pacemaker is being implanted.

Dual-chamber pacemaker with two leads



Scan the QR code for detailed information about the procedure.

After the procedure

You might feel sore or have bruising for a few days. Your cardiology team will tell you which medications are safe for you to take if you have any pain or discomfort. Serious problems are rare.

Call your doctor immediately if you notice:

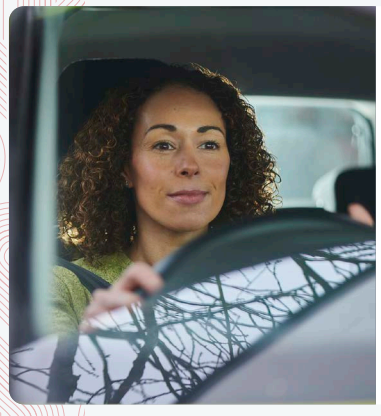
- symptoms like the ones you had before getting a pacemaker.
- hiccups or twitching in your chest.
- your heart feels like it's racing.
- your wound becomes red, swollen, hot, painful or leaks (this could mean an infection).

Caring for your wound

Keep your wound dry for 5–7 days.

Don't use plasters, creams or talcum powder on the wound.

Avoid touching the wound. It's important not to pick at the glue or stitches so your skin can heal.



Driving

At your two week follow up appointment, your cardiology team will check your pacemaker. It's important you don't drive until you've had this check-up.

The New Zealand Transport Agency (NZTA) states you must not drive for at least 2 weeks and this will be longer if your job involves driving a large vehicle, like a truck or bus.

While you're healing

Avoid

Avoid heavy lifting or raising your arm above your shoulder.

Avoid sports and activities that involve arm movements, like swimming and golf.

Get help with

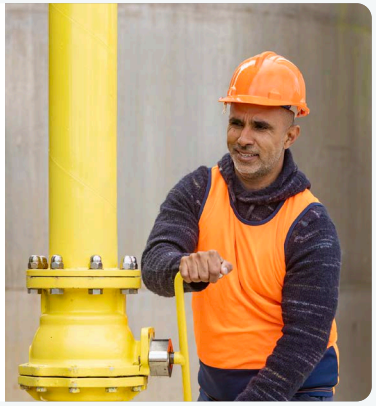
Everyday tasks like hanging out the washing, reaching into high cupboards, washing your hair or getting dressed.

It takes a few weeks for your pacemaker wires to heal fully and stay secure.

If you notice any problems with your pacemaker at any time, call your cardiology team right away.

Getting back to work

It's usually recommended to take two weeks off work after the procedure. If your job involves heavy physical labour, or driving large vehicles, talk to your doctor about returning to work.



Life with a pacemaker

Monitoring

You will have regular follow up at your local cardiac device clinic. The timing of these appointments will depend on your heart rhythm and how the pacemaker is working.

Some pacemakers have remote monitoring. This means the cardiology team can check your pacemaker data from their office while you're at home and you won't need to visit the clinic as often.

How long does a pacemaker battery last?

Most pacemaker batteries last between six and 12 years. This depends on the type of pacemaker and how often it sends signals to the heart.

A new pacemaker will be fitted before the old battery runs out. This is done in hospital, under a local anaesthetic. You won't be able to drive for two days afterwards.

Physical activity, sports and hobbies

Being active is great for your heart and helps with your recovery.

For the first six weeks, focus on low-impact exercises like walking and gentle cycling while you heal. Avoid heavy lifting, pushing, pulling or activities that involve swinging your arm.

After six weeks, slowly increase how long and how hard you exercise. Remember to warm up and cool down to prevent injuries.

If you play contact sports, protect your chest area. If you're hit in the chest, see your doctor.

Important: If you feel chest pain, dizziness or shortness of breath while exercising, stop right away and consult your doctor or nurse.

Pacemaker ID card

You'll be given an identification card (ID) for your pacemaker. Always carry this card and a list of your medications. You may also consider getting a Medic Alert bracelet. You may need to show your ID card when walking through metal detectors, for example, at an airport.

Travelling with a pacemaker

Most airport body scanners are safe, but always tell security staff you have a pacemaker. Ask them not to hold the hand-held metal detector over your chest.

Using electronics with a pacemaker

Most everyday electronic devices are safe with modern pacemakers. Some devices can send out strong electrical signals. If a device makes you feel dizzy or lightheaded, or you notice an unusual heartbeat, move away from it.

Mobile phones

Don't put mobile phone, earbuds or earphones in a chest pocket. Don't wear earphones around your neck.

MRI scans

Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scans use strong magnets to create images of the inside of your body.

Most modern pacemakers are safe with MRI scans, but will need special programming during the scan. The MRI centre will check with your cardiac device clinic prior to your scan to ensure it is safe.

Avoid other strong magnets or places with strong magnetic fields.

Other medical procedures

Tell your healthcare team you have a pacemaker before any medical procedure or treatment. Your pacemaker may need to be checked before and after.

If you have any problems with your pacemaker after a procedure, let your cardiology team know as soon as possible.

You have the power to improve your heart health

Heart Foundation

After the procedure

- [ ] I know how to care for my wound and the symptoms to watch for
- [ ] I know what movements and activities to avoid
- [ ] I know I can't drive until after my check-up
- [ ] I've talked to the doctor about returning to work
- [ ] I know how to safely return to exercise
- [ ] I have my ID card
- [ ] I know to avoid putting my mobile phone, earbuds or earphones in my chest pocket
- [ ] I know to mention my pacemaker before any medical procedure

Looking for support?

Call our Heart Line on 0800 863 375 or scan this QR code.

hearthelp.org.nz

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