

**PERMANENT CARDIAC PACEMAKER**

**PATIENT/FAMILY INFORMATION SHEET**

**What is a cardiac pacemaker?**

A cardiac pacemaker is a small electrical device inserted under the skin to control the heart rate and prevent the discomfort and symptoms caused by a very slow or fast heart rate.

**Why do I need a cardiac pacemaker?**

Cardiac pacemakers are used for a number of reasons. These include:

- A very slow heart rate leading to symptoms of fatigue, weakness and dizziness.
- A diagnosis found with an electrocardiogram that indicates a potential for sudden drastic drops in the heart rate.
- Injury to the heart muscle that may occur after a heart attack that interferes with your heart's ability to control the heart rate.
- To prevent the heart rate from dropping too low when you are taking certain medications to treat a very fast heart rate.

**How is a pacemaker inserted?**

Your physician will run several tests to make this determination. Most commonly, this will involve an electrocardiogram (EKG) and blood tests.

On the day of pacemaker insertion, you will be admitted to the hospital and you may expect to stay overnight. Before surgery, the physician may order for the area where the pacemaker is to be placed to be scrubbed and shaved (generally the left or right upper chest, near the shoulder). In most situations, you will be allowed light food and drink until you go to the operating room. A consent to perform the pacemaker insertion will be obtained and you will be given an opportunity to ask questions regarding the procedure.

An intravenous line will be started. You will be given a light sedative just before you are taken to the operating room. You will be awake, but sleepy during the procedure. A local anesthetic will be given where the pacemaker is to be inserted. During the procedure a drape may cover your face, so be sure to let the nurse or physician know if you suffer from claustrophobia (a fear of being "closed in").

A small cut is made at the insertion site and a small pocket formed. The pacemaker wire is threaded through a vein to your heart. The pacemaker, which is about the size of a silver dollar, is inserted and the area is stitched closed.

After the procedure, you will return to a special care area of the hospital where you will be closely monitored until discharge.

## How will I care for my new pacemaker?

Your nurse will discuss important aspects of your care with you before you go home. The following are VERY important:

- You may have some mild discomfort at the insertion site. Your physician will provide a plan for pain relief.
- Bandage the area over the pacemaker as directed and watch for any signs of infection such as elevated temperature, swelling, redness or drainage. If you notice any of these signs, notify your physician.
- DO NOT do any heavy lifting or put any unusual stress on the arm and shoulder where the pacemaker is inserted. Your physician will tell you when it is safe to lift heavy items.
- Your physician may tell you the pacemaker rate and ask you to take your pulse regularly. Notify the physician if your pulse is slower than the rate at which the pacemaker is set (see "How to Take a Pulse").
- Call your physician if you develop shortness of breath or difficulty catching your breath, weakness, dizziness or unusual fatigue.
- You will be given an educational booklet which also contains an identification card for your specific pacemaker.
- Call your health care provider with any questions and remember to keep all scheduled appointments.

## How can I get more information?

The American Heart Association website has an abundance of information on cardiac disease, including information on pacemakers. The American Heart Association website is [www.americanheart.org](http://www.americanheart.org). Information on care and management of a pacemaker is found at the links listed below:

- <http://216.185.112.5/presenter.jhtml?identifier=33>
- <http://216.185.112.5/presenter.jhtml?identifier=32>
- <http://216.185.112.5/presenter.jhtml?identifier=24#atrisk>

Use of a pacemaker identification card is a good way to document important information about your pacemaker and emergency contacts. A pacemaker identification card can be downloaded from the following link:

- [http://216.185.112.5/downloadable/heart/5367\\_pacemaker.pdf](http://216.185.112.5/downloadable/heart/5367_pacemaker.pdf)

*For more Patient Fact Sheets, see the Greenwich Hospital web site at [www.greenhosp.org](http://www.greenhosp.org) and click on Patients & Visitors, then Patient Education.*

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