What is a pacemaker?
A pacemaker is a small battery-operated device that’s placed under your skin (near your collarbone) to help your heart beat at a normal rate and rhythm. Your healthcare provider may decide you need a pacemaker if you have one or more of these problems:
• your heart rate is too slow (called bradycardia) or too fast (called tachycardia)
• your heartbeat isn’t regular
• you’re often very tired, short of breath, dizzy, or feel faint.

Tiny wires (called leads) that connect your heart to the pacemaker tell the pacemaker if your heart rate is too slow or too fast or if your heart’s rhythm is irregular. The pacemaker then sends signals back to your heart to correct the rate or rhythm, which will make you feel better.

How is the pacemaker placed under my skin?
After you receive medication to numb your skin, your cardiologist will make a 2- to 4-inch (5- to 10-cm) incision, usually on the left side of your chest. He’ll place the pacemaker under your skin, place one or more leads into a vein that’s connected to your heart, and close the skin over the pacemaker. The procedure usually takes 1 to 2 hours, and most patients go home within 1 day.

After the procedure, the pacemaker site may be slightly bruised, swollen, and tender. Your cardiologist will give you medication for any discomfort. Once the site heals completely, you won’t be aware that you have a pacemaker.

The pacemaker runs on a battery. Depending on the type of pacemaker you have, the battery lasts 5 to 10 years. Your cardiologist will tell you when you need a new battery.

How should I take care of myself after I get a pacemaker?
For the first few weeks after receiving your pacemaker, don’t raise your arm (the one closer to the pacemaker site) above the level of your heart. Keeping your arm down will help the area heal and keep the leads from moving. Your cardiologist may have you wear an arm sling to remind you to keep your arm down.

Don’t shower until the third day after the procedure. Gently wash the incision site, but don’t put lotion or powder on it. For the first few weeks, don’t wear shirts and sweaters that you must pull over your head. Wear shirts that button up the front instead.

For 1 to 2 months, don’t lift, push, or pull anything that weighs more than 5 pounds (2.3 kg), including groceries and children. Don’t do arm exercises and don’t do tasks or activities, like sweeping, that require you to repeatedly move your arm. Don’t put pressure on the incision site (for example, by wearing suspenders or tight clothing). Don’t drive until your cardiologist says it’s okay.

Tell all your healthcare providers, including your dentist, that you have a pacemaker. Always carry ID that lets others know.

When should I call my cardiologist?
Call your cardiologist if you have:
• dizziness, fainting spells, or trouble catching your breath
• swelling, fluid, warmth, pain, or redness (or other unusual colors) at the pacemaker site
• chills or a temperature of 100.5° F (38° C) or higher
• pain in your chest or a feeling that a muscle is twitching near your heart
• hiccups that last more than 15 minutes
• weight gain of more than 3 pounds (1.4 kg) in 2 days or less
• swelling in your hands, feet, or arms
• palpitations or a feeling that your heart is beating too fast
• a heart rate that is 5 to 10 beats less than your programmed rate.

When you’re home, your cardiologist may use signals from your telephone to check your pacemaker and make sure it’s working correctly. From a device in his office, he can tell if your pacemaker needs to be adjusted.

This patient-education guide has been adapted for the 5th-grade level using the Flesch–Kincaid and SMOG formulas. It may be photocopied for clinical use or adapted to meet your facility’s requirements. Selected references are available upon request.

Special thanks to Tracy Kane, MEd, CHES, community health educator at Capital Health System in Trenton, N.J.