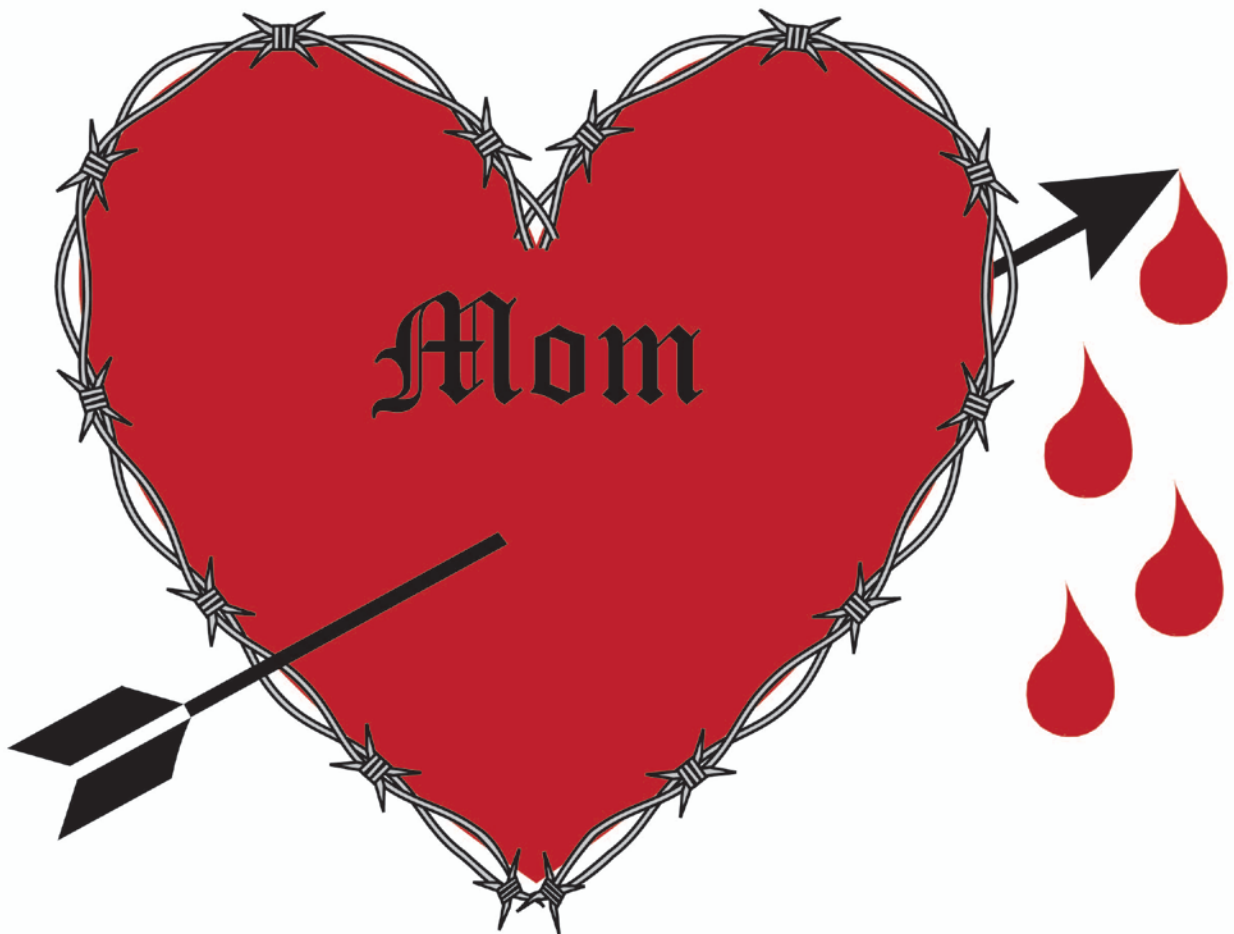


A "Doc Squirrel" and "Kid Cat" Adventure

# Coronary CT



Stefan Tigges MD MSCR

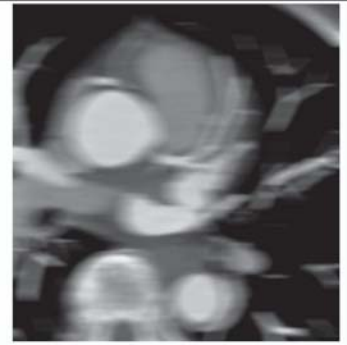


Hey Cat, what you looking at?

A cardiac coronary CT scan, but the images are really blurry; I am having a hard time recognizing the vessels.



"Right" phase=sharp



"Wrong" phase=blurry

That's because you are looking at the wrong phase. Want some help?

Sure, if it's not too complicated.



It is complicated, but interesting. To understand coronary CT, we must understand CT basics, normal cardiac anatomy/physiology and cardiac pathology.

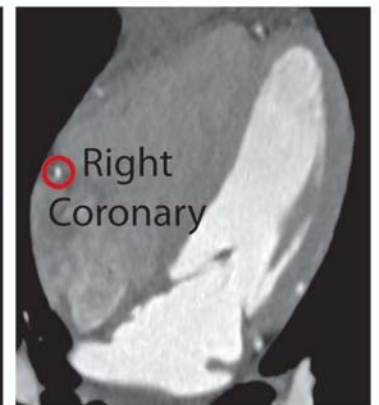
1



Sigh. Let's start by learning about CT.



Coronary CT is the most technically demanding use of computed tomography. When CT was introduced in the 1970s, it was used for brain imaging. It took almost 30 years for the technology to mature sufficiently to make coronary imaging practical.



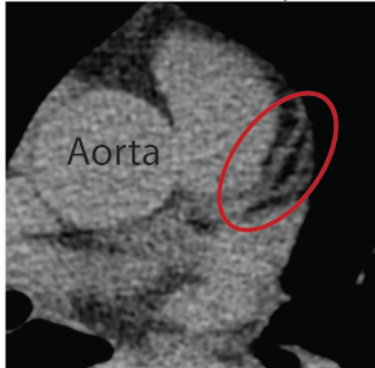
How come?



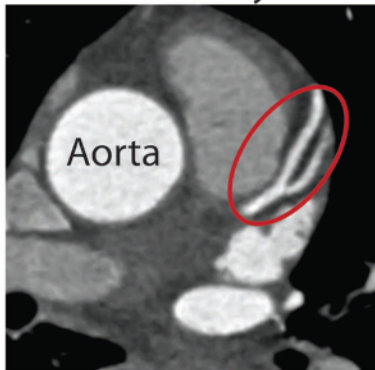
Coronary arteries are small moving structures. Severely diseased vessels may look almost normal. Brains are big, immobile structures and abnormalities like tumors and strokes are often easy to distinguish from normal brain.



Without IV Dye



With IV Dye

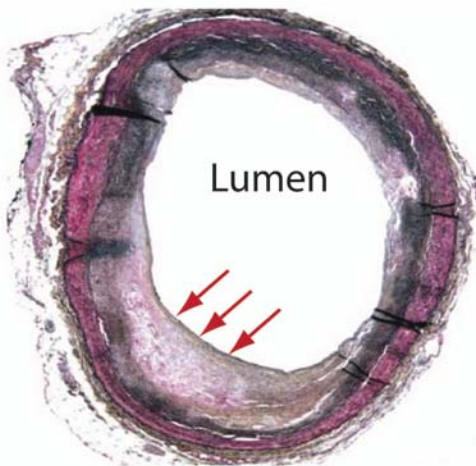


How do we overcome these limitations?

Coronary CT requires excellent contrast, spatial and temporal resolution. We will start with contrast resolution. What is the difference between these 2 images?

On the first one the vessels are gray, but on the second one the vessels are white except for a small amount of peripheral gray.

The first image was obtained without intravascular contrast while the second was obtained with IV contrast. On the first image the vessel wall and the vessel lumen are indistinguishable. On the second image, the lumen contains white contrast or x-ray dye surrounded by the thin gray vessel wall.



So the IV contrast allows us to tell the vessel wall from the lumen. Why is that important?

Atherosclerosis occurs in the vessel wall. This coronary specimen shows a small but dangerous plaque (red arrows) within the vessel wall. Without IV dye, it would be difficult to see this plaque; the lumen and the vessel wall would be indistinguishable.

That plaque hardly narrows the vessel, how can it possibly be dangerous?

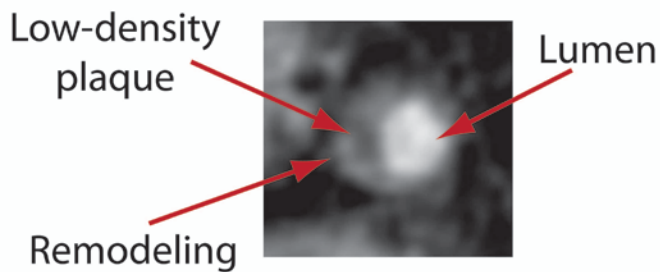
Most plaques that cause morbidity and mortality narrow vessels less than 50%. So called vulnerable plaques rupture into the arterial lumen, causing an acute clot which partially or completely obstructs the vessel with distal cardiac ischemia.

What makes a plaque vulnerable?

People are still trying to figure that out, but vulnerable plaques have a necrotic lipid core, a thin fibrous cap and are inflamed.

Can you tell the difference between stable and vulnerable plaques with CT?





Sometimes. Because of their lipid content, vulnerable plaques may have low density while stable plaques are often calcified. Vulnerable plaques may also result in positive remodeling.

What's that?

As the plaque grows, the vessel diameter increases as if to maintain a constant lumen diameter.



Normal Vessel



Normal Angiogram



Severe atherosclerosis with positive remodeling

Abnormal Vessel



Near Normal Angiogram

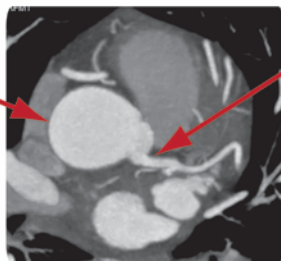


Since you can't see the vessel wall on angiography, you could miss remodeling.

That's right. Catheter angiography results in a "lumenogram" and may underestimate disease severity. The gold standard for evaluating the extent of vessel wall disease is endovascular ultrasound, but CT also allows us to recognize a thickened vessel wall.

3

Aorta (3 cm)

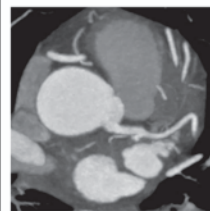


Left main coronary (5 mm)

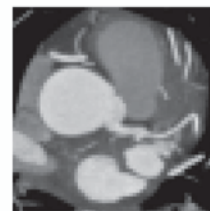
So the IV x-ray dye gives us enough contrast resolution to distinguish between vessel wall and lumen. That way we can recognize plaque and estimate how narrowed an artery is. What is spatial resolution?



Simply put, it is the ability to see small structures, like coronary arteries. The biggest coronary artery, the left main is only about 5 mm in diameter.



Many Pixels



Fewer Pixels



Fewest Pixels

How do we improve spatial resolution?

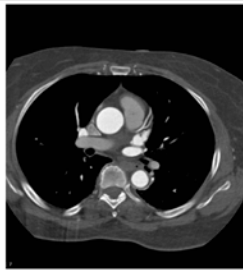
By increasing the number of pixels and reducing the field of view.

I understand how increasing the number of pixels allows us to see smaller structures, but what is field of view?

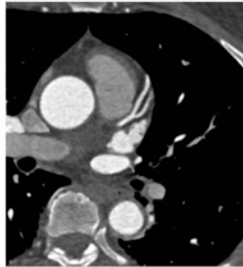




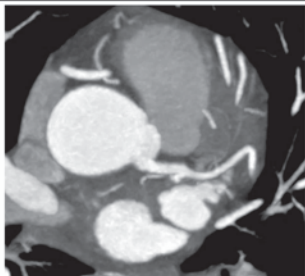
Large  
FOV



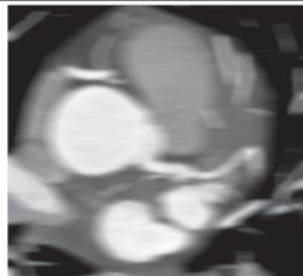
Small  
FOV



If you do a cardiac CT, you have the scanner image (take a picture of) only the heart, excluding all other chest structures. This is analogous to taking a close up of an object with a camera, allowing you to more easily see fine details that you would miss in a long shot. With a small field of view, you put all of your pixels in a smaller area, allowing you to see smaller structures.



Fast CT,  
no motion



Slow CT,  
motion blur



It's that easy?

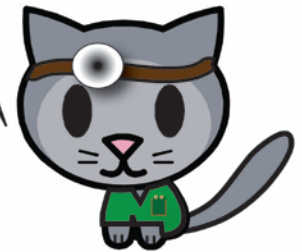


Well no, I have oversimplified things, but it's true that the faster the CT "doughnut" rotates around the patient, the faster an image is obtained, resulting in less blurring because of motion. Older scanners took many seconds to rotate 360 degrees and generate an image, but the latest scanners rotate completely around a patient in about .3 seconds. In addition, newer scanners obtain multiple slices or cross sections each time the scanner rotates around the patient.

Next topic. Any guess as to what temporal resolution is? I will give you a hint: it helps us deal with cardiac motion.

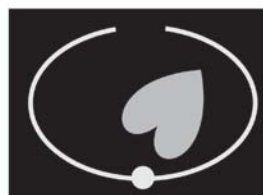


Temporal resolution must help us compensate for motion.

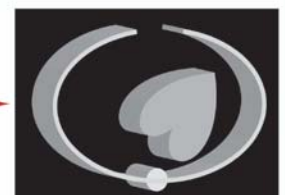


Right. If you take a photograph of a moving object and leave the shutter open too long, you end up with a blurry picture. A CT scanner is similar: every time the scanner rotates around a patient, it takes a picture. If the scanner rotates slowly and the patient is moving, the image is blurry. If the scanner rotates quickly and the patient is motionless, the image is crisp.

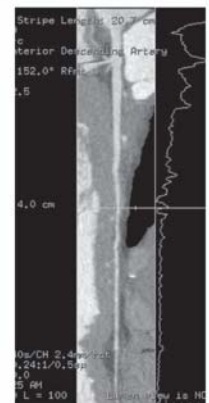
In fact, CT scanners obtain multiple thin overlapping images so quickly that you can think of a CT scan as resulting in a volume of data that you can reconstruct in multiple ways.



Curved LAD Reformat



Ribbon View





360 degrees,  
.3 seconds



180 degrees,  
.15 seconds

Is increased scanner speed enough to generate motion free images?



No, it's not. When we image the heart, we use only about 50% of a scanner rotation to make our picture. This trick reduces our imaging time to about .15 seconds.



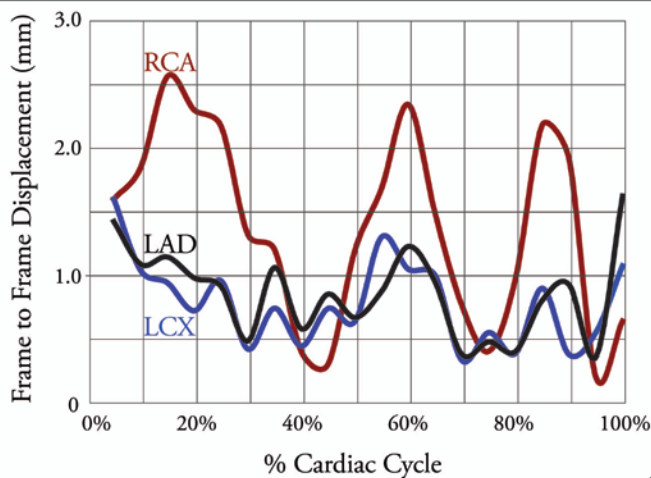
Is that good enough?



We may also use Beta blockers to reduce the heart rate and nitroglycerine to dilate the coronaries and make them easier to see.



Radiologists dispensing medications?! Surely we have done enough to see the coronaries.



No, there is one last trick. We have to image the heart when it moves the least. Look at this graph that shows the velocity of the coronary arteries throughout the cardiac cycle. What do you see?

It looks like the coronary arteries are always moving, but it looks like there are times when the vessels move more slowly than at other times.



That's true. This video clip of vessel motion confirms that there are times when the vessels are relatively still. Click on the camera to run the movie. If we could turn on our scanner only during the quiescent periods, we could make relatively motion free images.

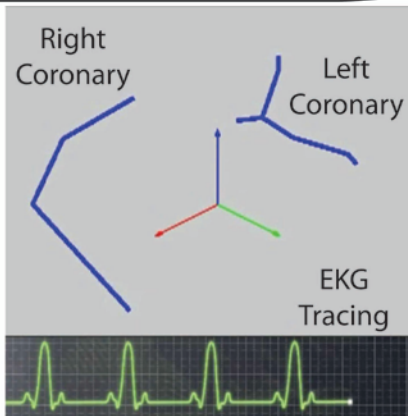


How do we do that?

Let's break that question into a CT and a physiology component and start with the CT part. How might a CT scanner "know" that the heart is relatively motionless?

By attaching an EKG machine to the scanner.

That is called cardiac gating. The scanner uses the EKG tracing to predict the amount of motion. Gating can be prospective or retrospective.



Prospective, scanner intermittently on (green boxes)



Retrospective, scanner always on (green box)



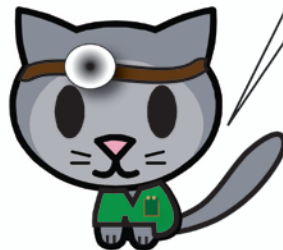
Reconstruct images from diastolic data (red boxes)

What is the difference?

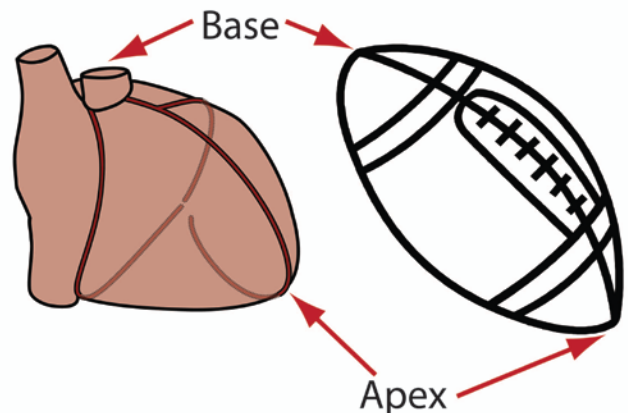


In prospective gating, the scanner is on and images are acquired only during diastole. In retrospective gating, the scanner is on during the entire cardiac cycle. The CT software links the EKG and scan data and reconstructs images using data obtained during diastole.

When would you use these different techniques?

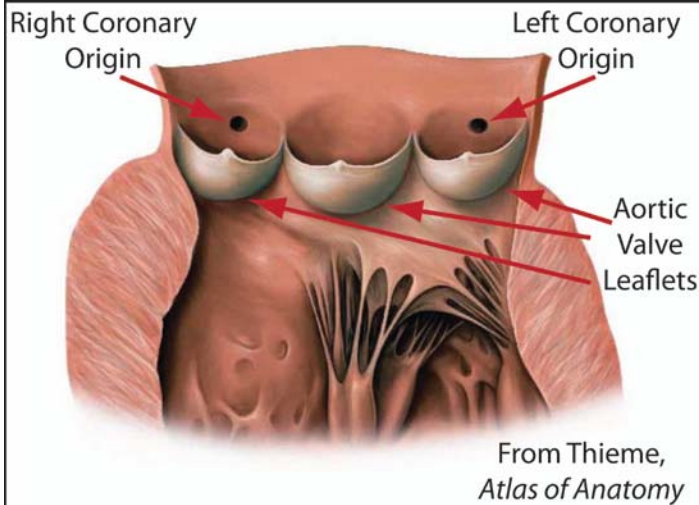


Since the scanner is on only during diastole, prospective scanning results in a lower radiation dose. Retrospective gating results in a higher dose, but since you scan during both systole and diastole, you can make short movie loops of the beating heart and estimate functional parameters like ejection fraction. Retrospective imaging is also more forgiving than prospective scanning. If the scanner is not turned on at the right time during a prospective scan, the images may be blurry, but since a retrospective scan includes data from the entire cardiac cycle, you can reconstruct images from any part of the cardiac cycle.

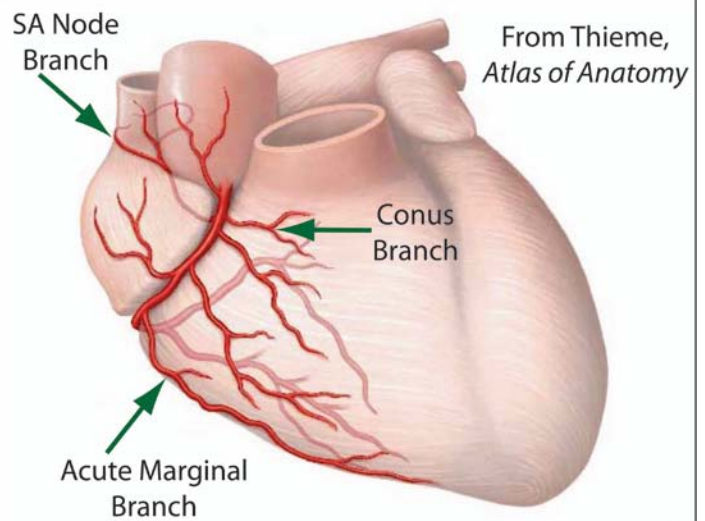


Cool, now how about the physiology?

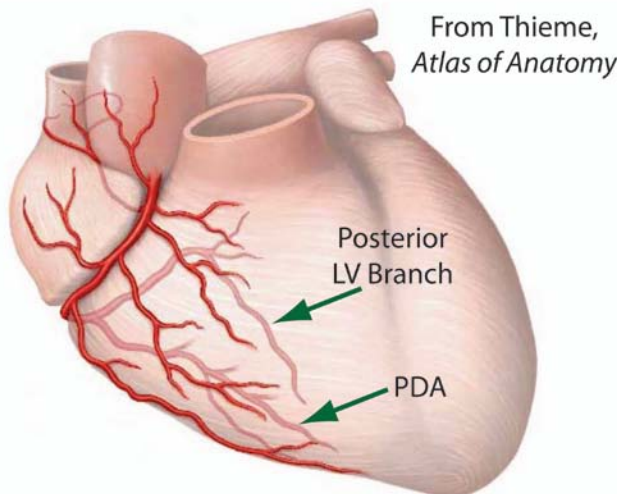
Before we do that we should review coronary and cardiac anatomy. Think of the heart as a truncated football. The tip that abuts the chest wall is called the apex, while the part back toward the atria is the base. Just like a football, the heart has seams where the atria and ventricles converge known as grooves. The coronary arteries run in these grooves. Do you remember the coronary artery anatomy?



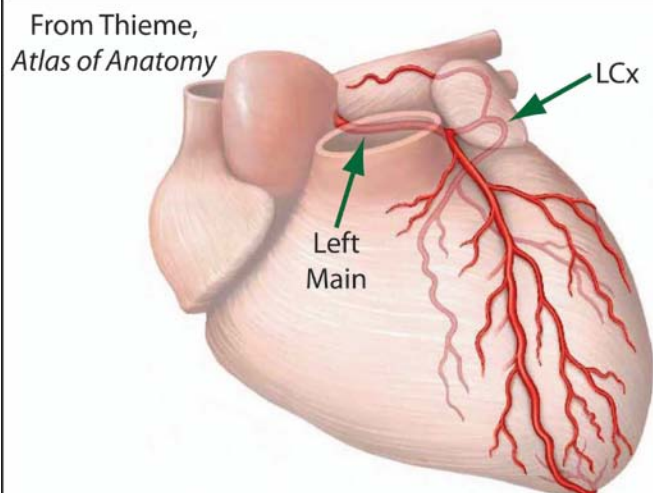
Of course. The coronary arteries are the first vessels to arise from the aorta and the only vessels that come off the ascending aorta. The right coronary artery arises from the right sinus of Valsalva while the left coronary arises from the left sinus, just above the aortic valve leaflets.



The RCA runs in the groove between the right atrium and the right ventricle towards the back of the heart. The proximal RCA gives off a conus branch that runs anterior to the pulmonary artery and the artery to the sinoatrial node. In the right AV groove, the RCA gives off multiple acute marginal branches that supply the right ventricle.

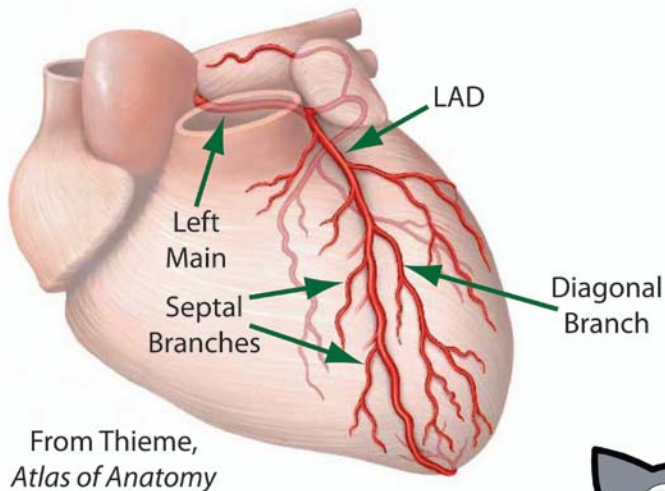


At the back of the heart the distal RCA divides into a posterior left ventricular branch and a posterior descending artery (PDA). The posterior left ventricular branch supplies (not surprisingly!) the back of the left ventricle. The PDA runs in the posterior interventricular groove and supplies the posterior interventricular septum.



The left main coronary artery is very short, and divides into 2 large vessels, the left circumflex (LCx) and the left anterior descending (LAD). The Circ is the left sided equivalent of the RCA and runs in the left AV groove. The LCx supplies the lateral wall of the left ventricle with obtuse marginal branches.



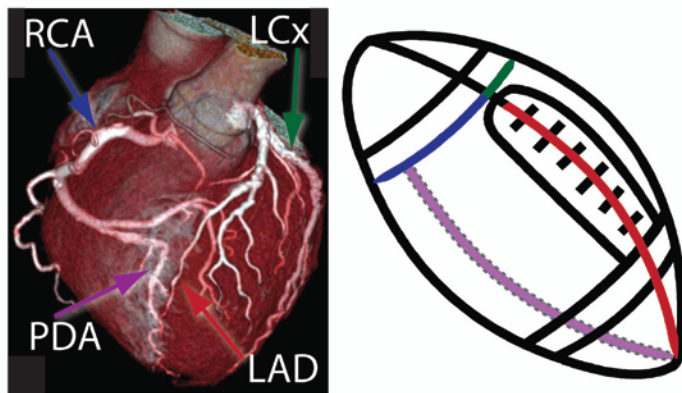


From Thieme,  
*Atlas of Anatomy*

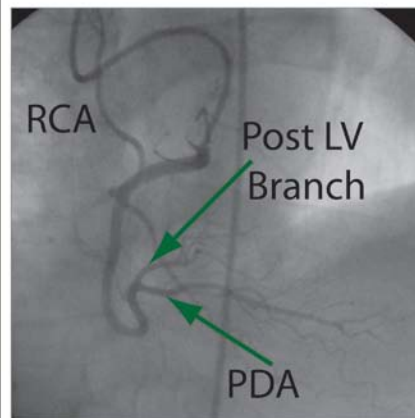
The LAD is a large vessel that runs in the anterior interventricular groove and supplies the anterior 2/3s of the septum with septal branches and the anterior left ventricle with diagonal branches.

That is the most common coronary configuration and is called right dominant, not because the RCA supplies most of the heart with blood (it doesn't!), but because a dominant RCA gives rise to the PDA and the posterior LV branch. In a left dominant system, which occurs in about 15% of the population, there is left dominance: the PDA and Posterior LV branch arise from the Circ. In another 15% of patients, there is co-dominance. Which vessel do you think is most important?

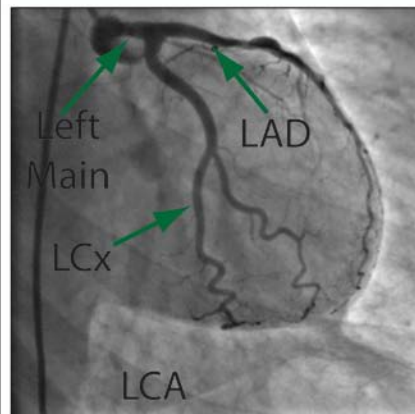
The LAD seems to supply the most important part of the myocardium.



Let's review our football analogy. The **LAD** runs down the long seam at the front of the football, while the **PDA** runs down the long seam at the back. The **RCA** and the **Circ** run in the right and left AV grooves respectively. The next several panels include still frames and cine loops from catheter angiograms and CT scans that you can use to review this anatomy.

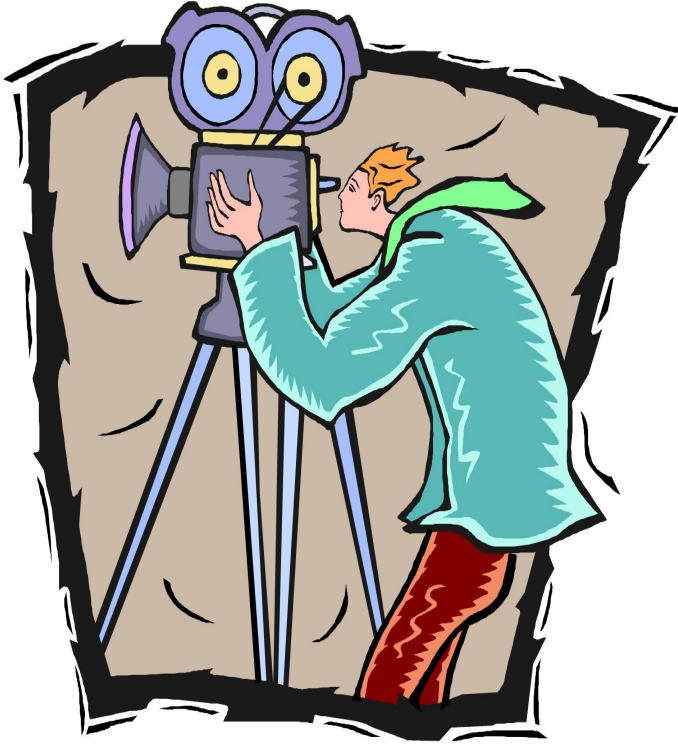


Still frame from RCA cath shows distal branching into PDA and post LV branch.

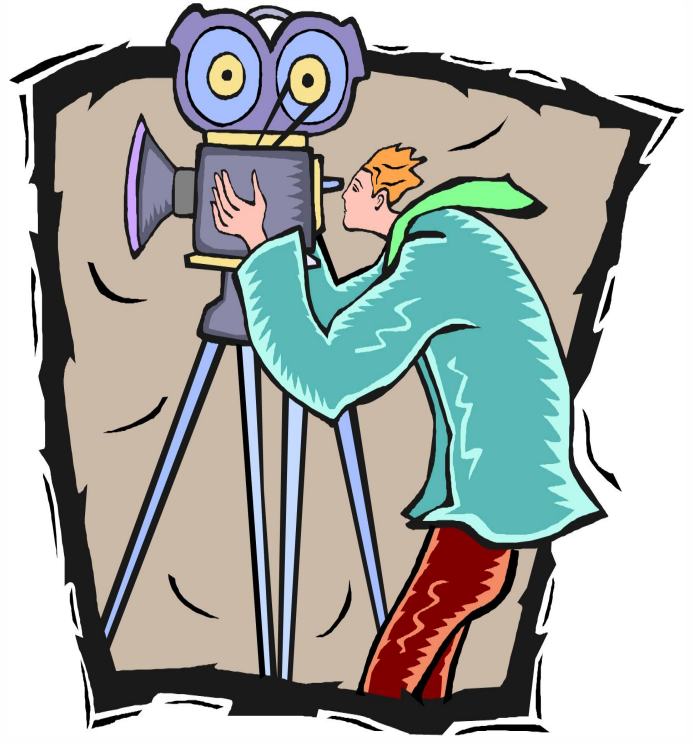


Still frame from LCA cath shows proximal branching into LAD and circumflex.

RCA Cath Cine, click on the camera to start.

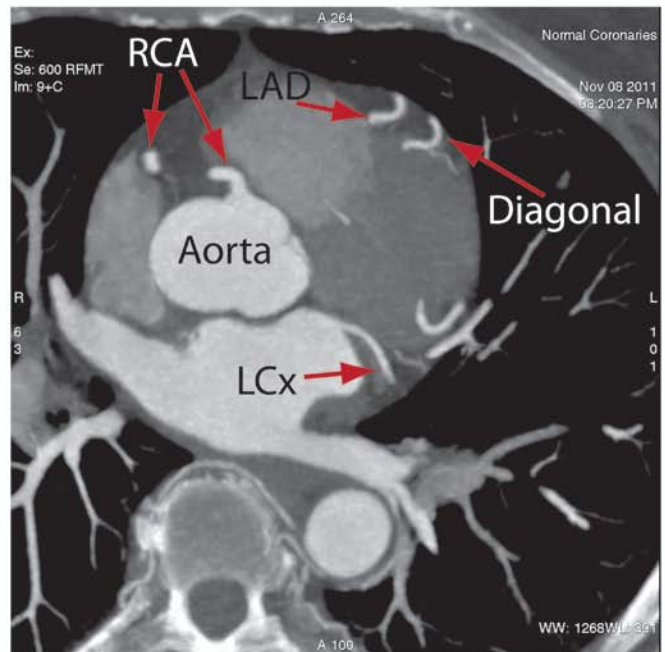
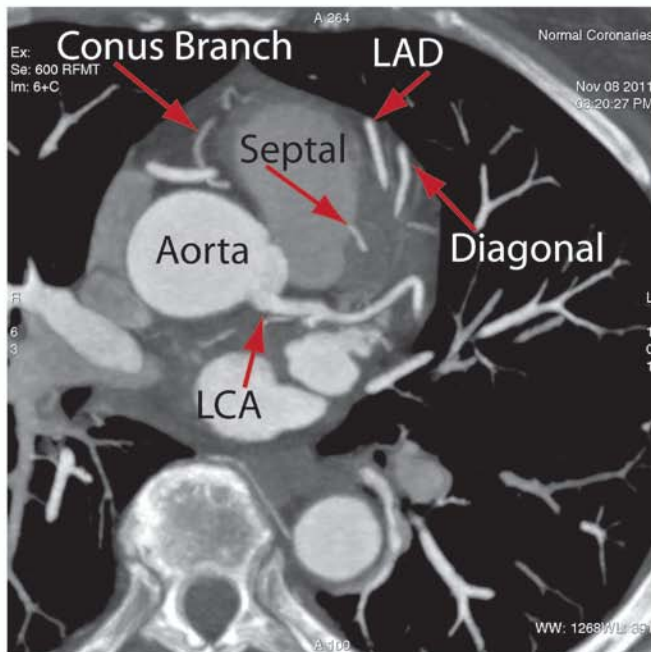


LCA Cath Cine, click on the camera to start.



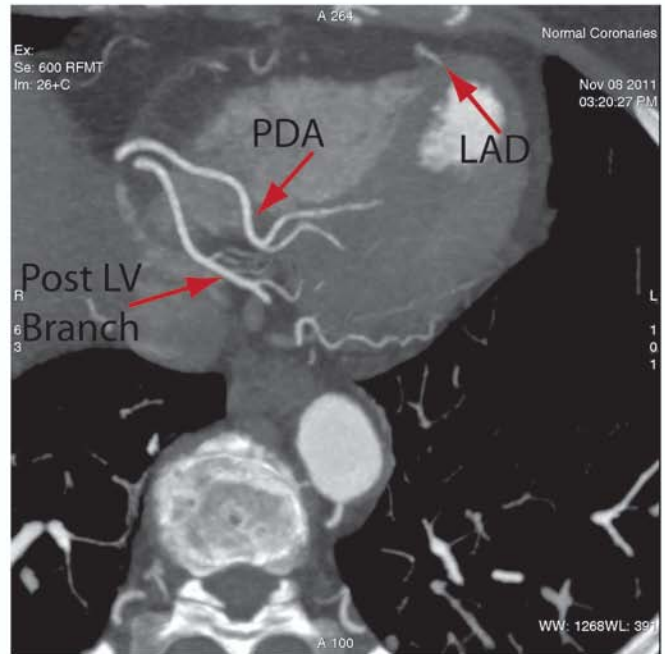
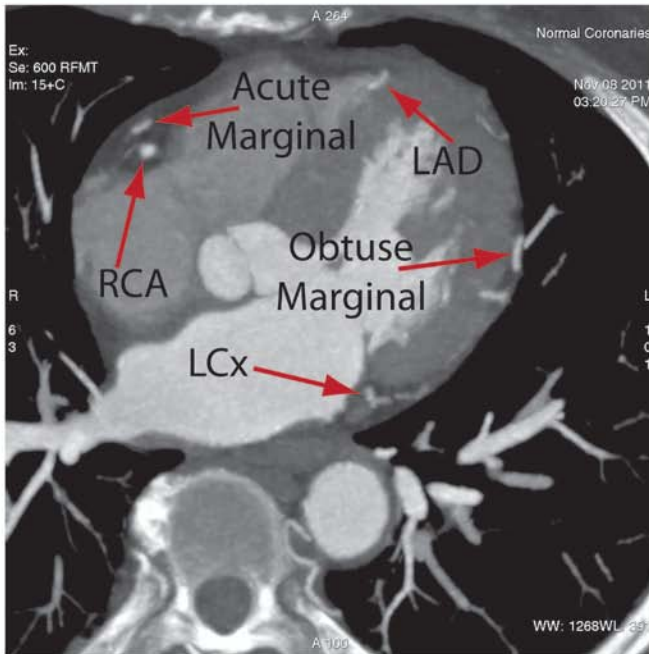
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## Coronary CT Anatomy



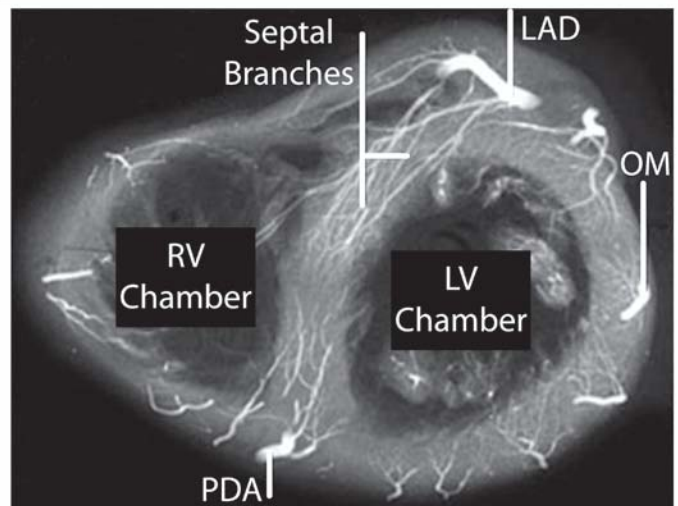
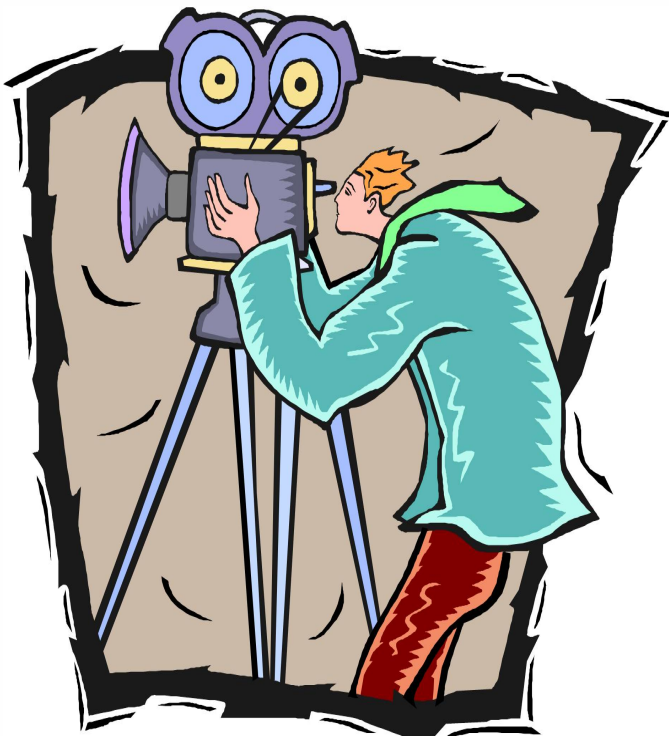


# Coronary CT Anatomy



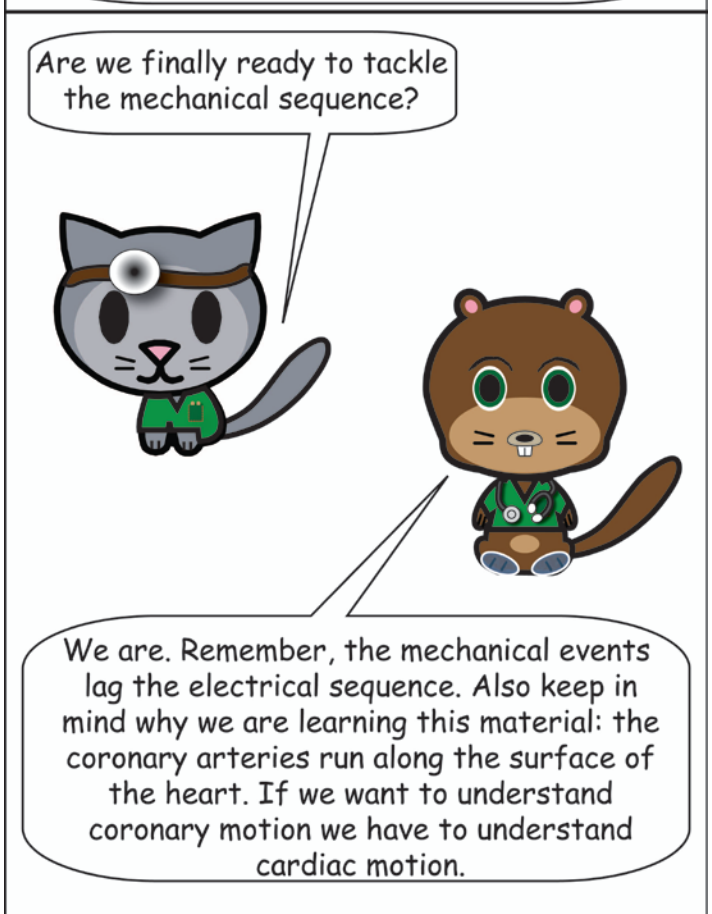
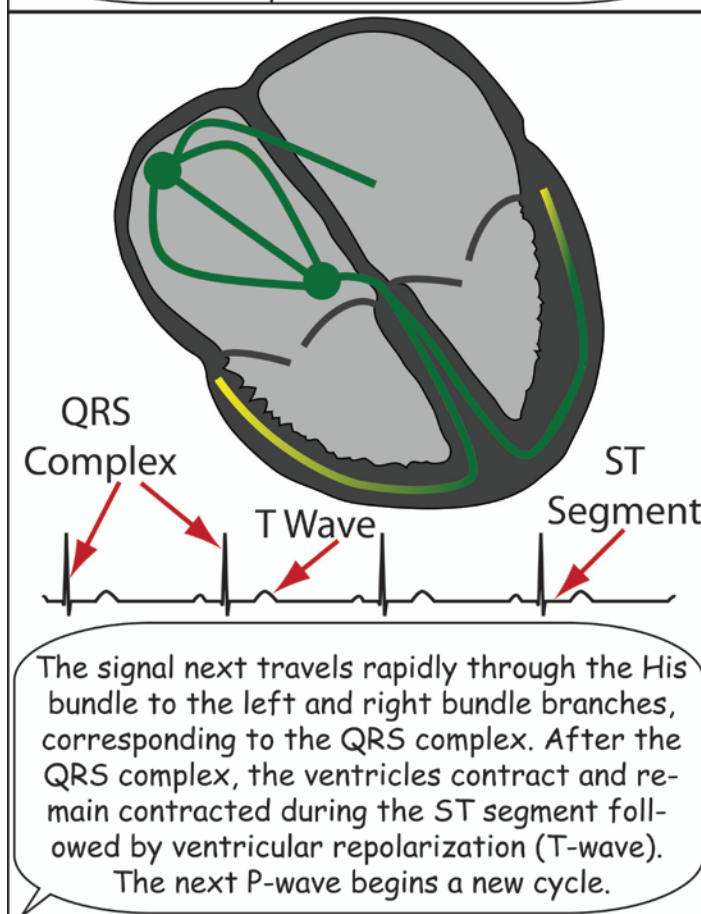
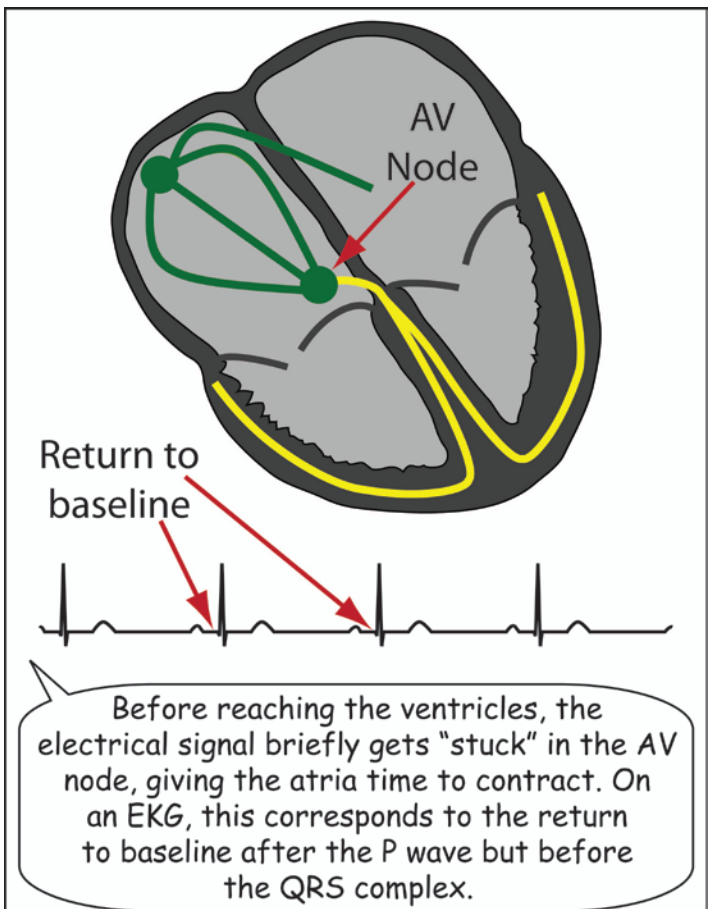
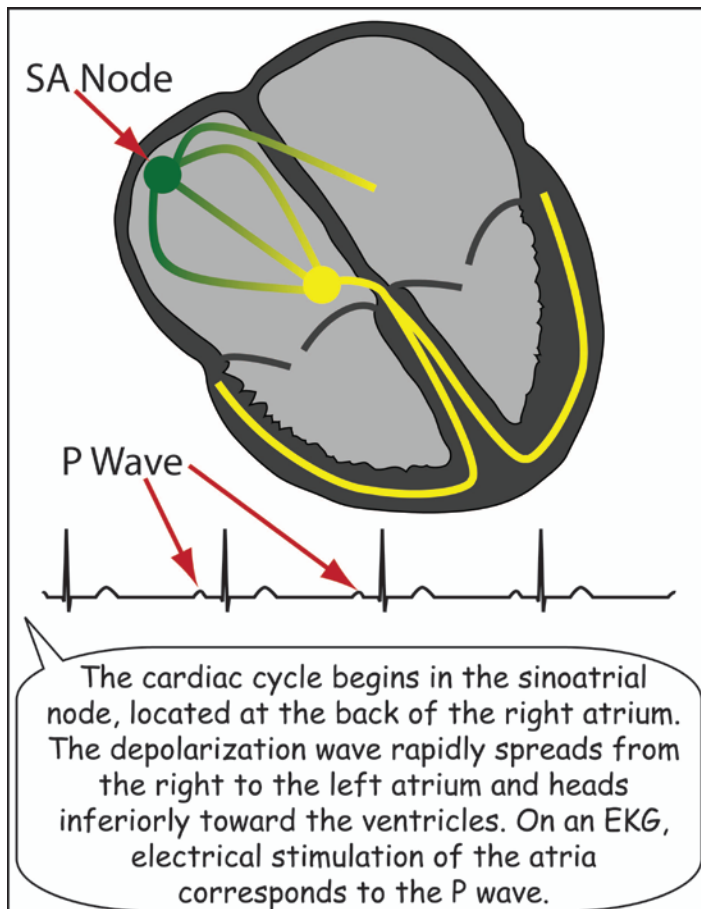
10

Coronary CT cine, click on camera to start



If you know where the coronaries run, you can anticipate what vessel supplies what part of the myocardium.

Can we move on to the cardiac electrical sequence?





What's this funny looking diagram?

It's called a Wiggers diagram. It shows us the relationship between cardiac chamber volumes/pressures, the EKG tracing and cardiac motion.

Looks scary.

All right.

We'll go over it step by step and include line drawings of the heart to illustrate cardiac motion.

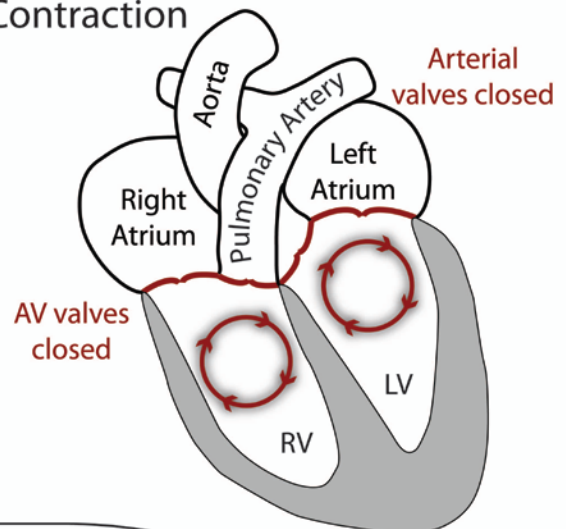
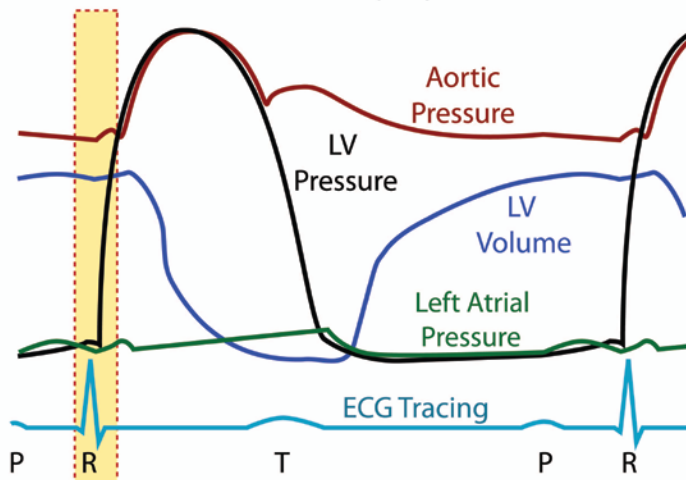
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### Late Diastole: Atrial Systole

Let's start with what happens right after the atrial p-wave. The atria contract, squeezing a small amount of blood (**thin curved red arrows**) across the AV valves into the ventricles. This part of the cardiac cycle is called late diastole (ventricles relaxed) or atrial systole (atria contracted), but to maintain consistency, we will stick with late diastole.

How come only a small amount of blood crosses the AV valves in late diastole?

## Early Systole: Isovolumic Contraction

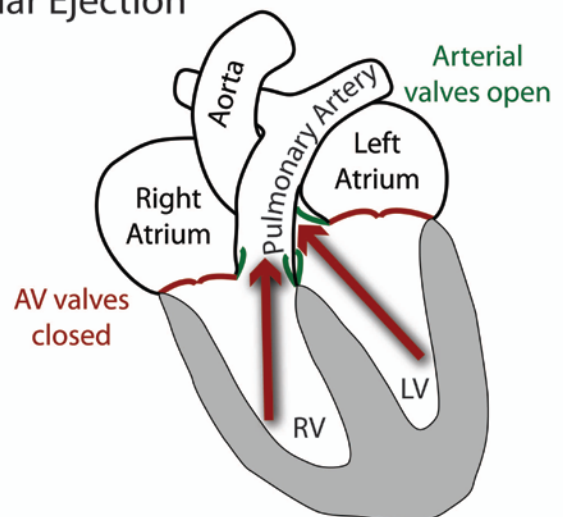
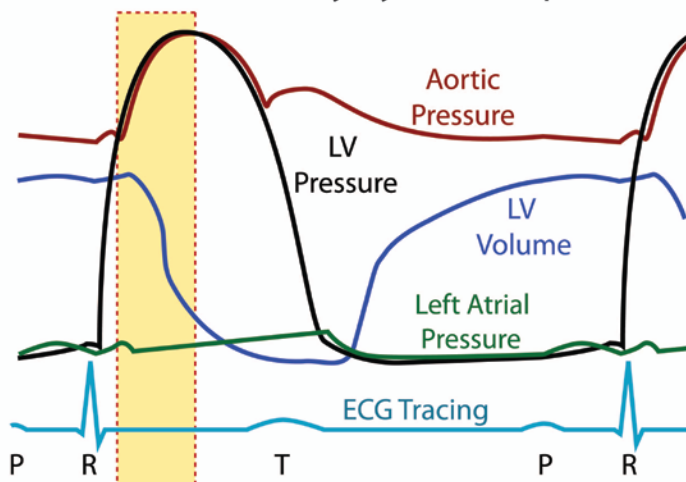


As we will see, most blood flows across the AV valves earlier in diastole, but let's move on to early systole. As the ventricles start to squeeze during and right after the QRS complex, there is a short period of time when ventricular pressure exceeds atrial pressure, closing the AV valves, but is not high enough to force open the arterial valves. Since no blood enters or leaves the ventricles (red circles) during early systole, this part of the cardiac cycle is referred to as isovolumic contraction.

When does blood get out of the ventricles?



## Early Systole: Rapid Ventricular Ejection



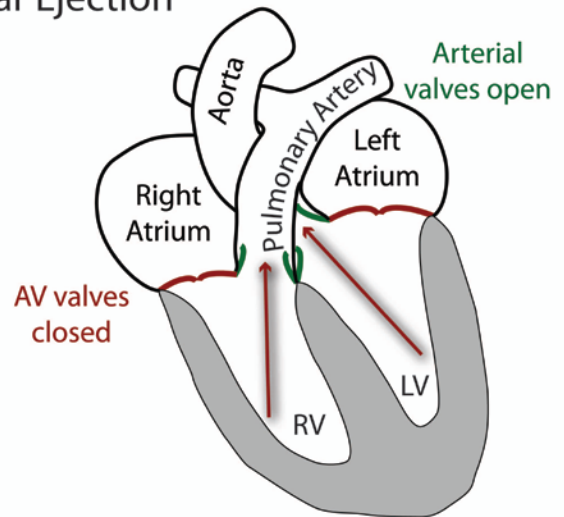
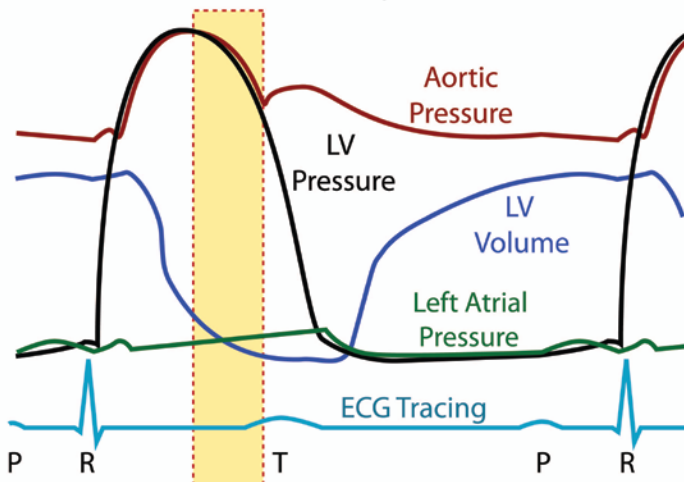
The pressure within the ventricles increases rapidly during early systole, forcing open the arterial valves. During this phase of rapid ventricular ejection a large volume (thick red arrows) of blood flows across the arterial valves.

If there is a phase of rapid ejection, I bet there is a phase of slow ejection.





## Late Systole: Slow Ventricular Ejection

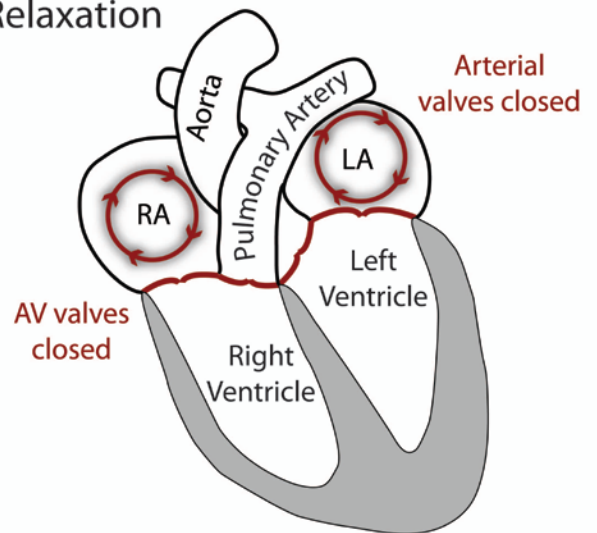
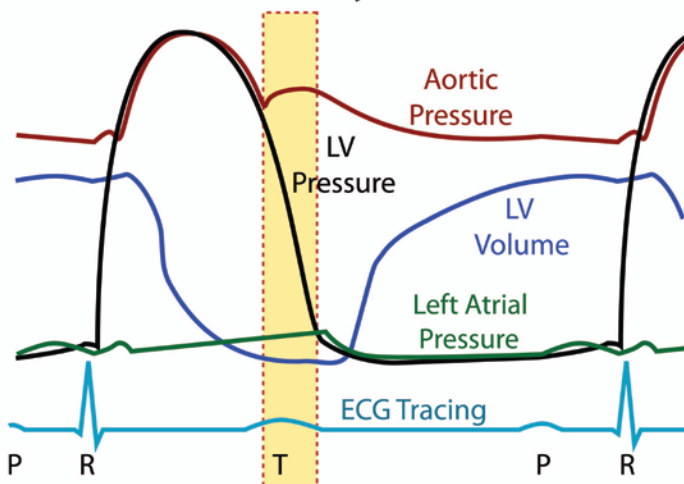


Right. If you compare the LV and aortic pressures in the Wiggers diagram, you can see that about halfway through systole, the aortic pressure exceeds LV pressure. A small amount of blood (**thin red arrows**) manages to cross the arterial valves during this late systolic phase of slow ventricular ejection.

How does blood go from the lower pressure LV into the higher pressure aorta?



## Early Diastole: Isovolumic Relaxation

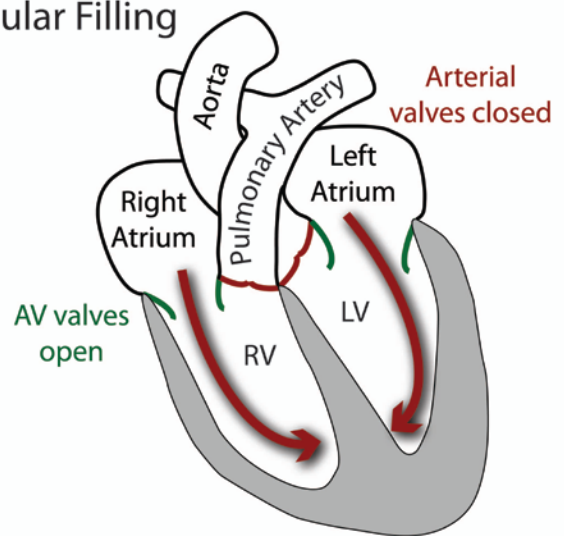
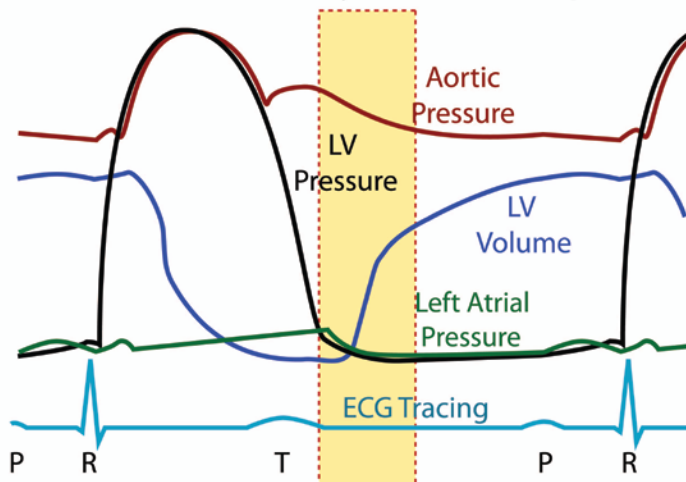


I'm a squirrel, I don't understand, but smart people claim it's because of momentum. Eventually, the LV pressure decreases enough so that the aortic valve closes, but ventricular pressure is still higher than atrial pressure. The AV valves are also closed during this phase of early diastole called isovolumic relaxation. No blood enters or leaves the atria (**red circles**) during isovolumic relaxation.

But eventually the AV valves open, right?



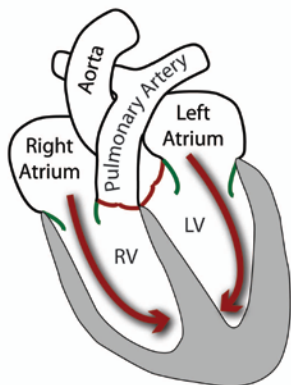
## Early Diastole: Rapid Ventricular Filling



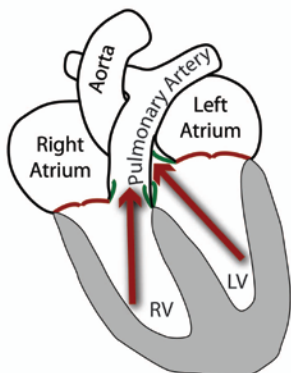
Indeed. The next phase of early diastole is rapid ventricular filling characterized by large amounts of blood (**thick curved red arrows**) crossing the AV valves. So far we have 2 phases of the cardiac cycle characterized by large volumes of moving blood. That creates a lot of cardiac motion and since the coronaries sit on the epicardial surface, they will move as well.

So this would not be a good time to image the coronaries since they would look blurry.

## Early Diastole



## Early Systole

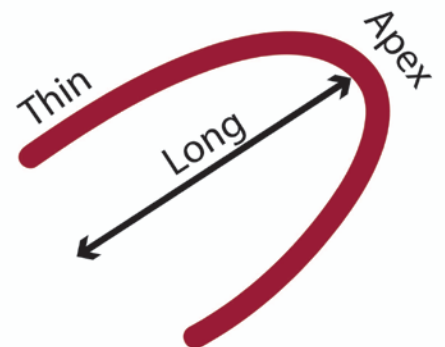


That's right. Why do you suppose there is so much intracardiac blood flow during early systole and diastole?

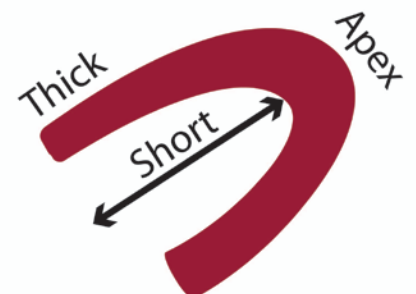
I don't know.

It has to do with the anatomy of the myocardium. Cardiac muscle is cleverly designed as well as hard working. There are 3 types of cardiac motion: shortening from apex to base, thickening and twisting. Cine loops of all 3 kinds of motion are included on the next panel. Click the movie cameras to play the cines.

## LV Myocardium, Diastole



## LV Myocardium, Systole

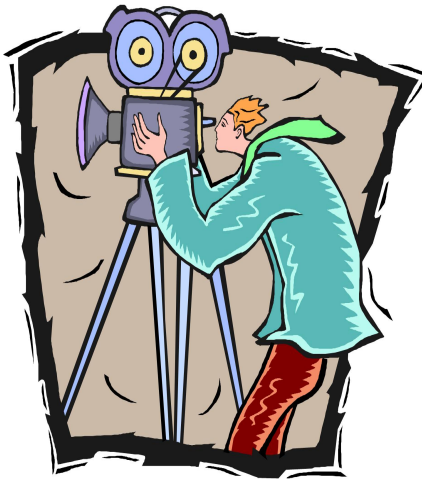




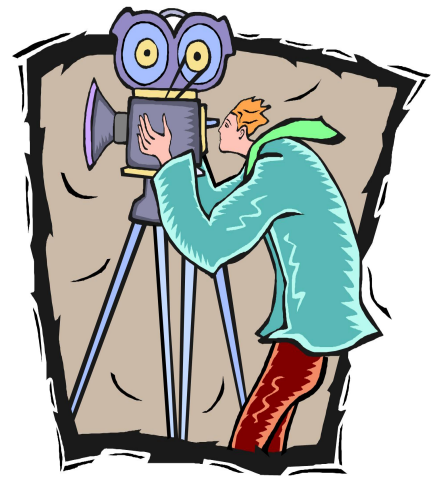
## Shortening



## Thickening



## Twisting



16

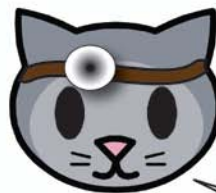


Sengupta, et al.  
JACC, 2006

Left handed  
subepicardial helix



View of  
cardiac apex  
from below  
shows helical  
trabeculae, from  
Sobota, *Atlas  
of Anatomy*



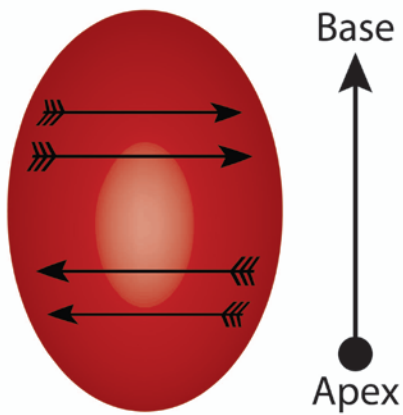
How does the heart twist?

Right handed  
subendocardial helix

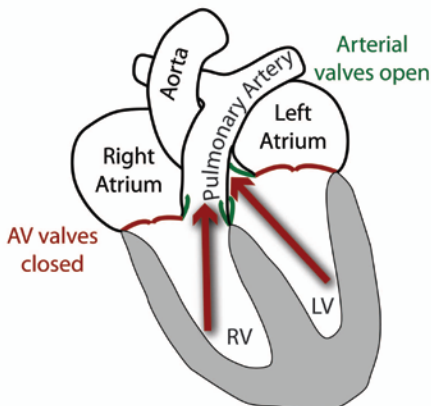


That's where the clever design comes in. Cardiac muscle fibers are arranged in a helix, with a left handed subepicardial helix and a right handed subendocardial helix. Contraction of these helices results in rotation: if one helix contracts more vigorously than the other, then the heart rotates.

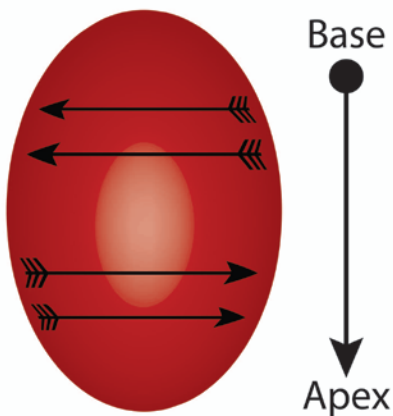




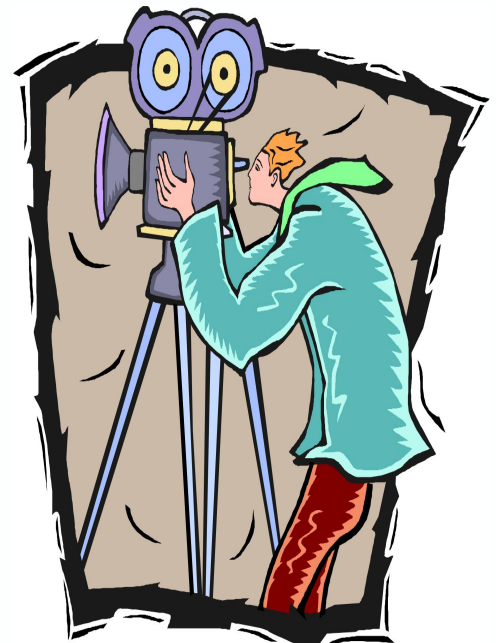
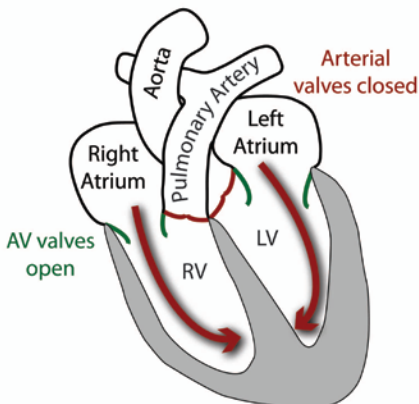
During early systole, the subendocardial muscle contracts more vigorously than the subepicardial fibers, beginning at the apex and proceeding to the base. The resulting rapid sequential clockwise cardiac rotation from apex to base results in a twisting motion that helps to push a large volume of blood out of the ventricles during this phase of the cardiac cycle. After an initial clockwise rotation, the base reverses direction and rotates in an anti-clockwise direction. This motion has been compared to wringing water out of a wet towel by twisting the two ends in opposite directions.



So this wringing motion during the rapid ejection phase blasts lots of blood out of the heart, resulting in brisk cardiac and coronary motion. Why is there so much motion during early diastole?

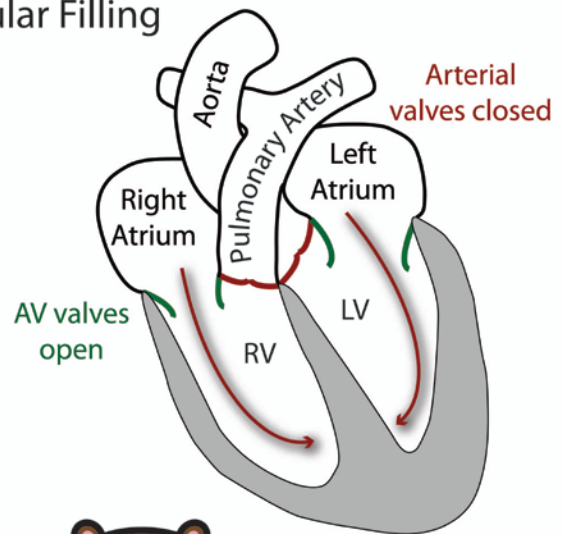
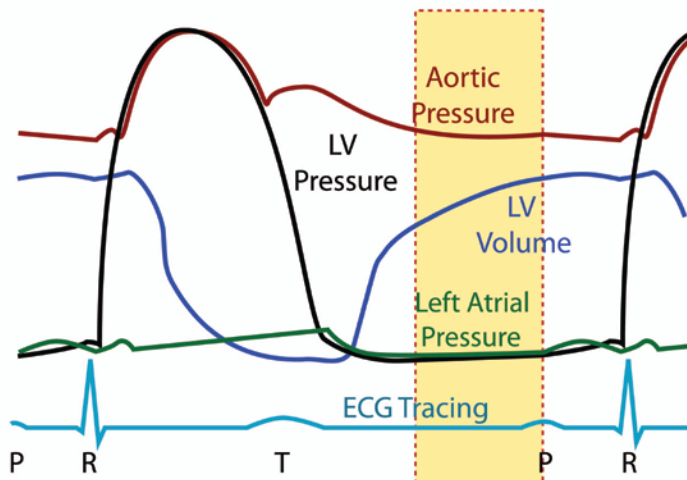


During rapid ventricular filling, the opposite sequence of events occurs, with rapid untwisting of the ventricles. This rapid untwisting sucks a large volume of blood from the atria into the ventricles, resulting in lots of cardiac and coronary motion. Click on the movie camera on the right for a cine showing this motion.





## Mid Diastole: Slow Ventricular Filling



Seems like we are running out of opportunities to image the heart. So far all we have are very short low motion phases or phases with lots of motion.

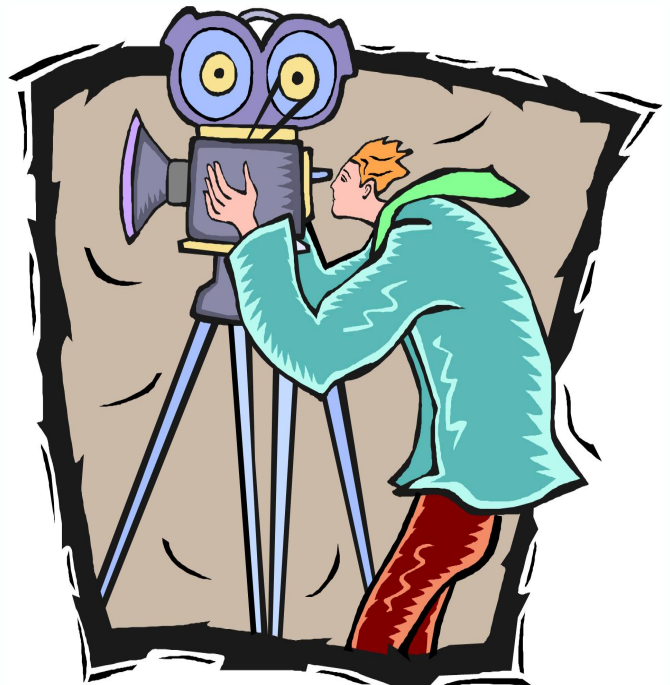


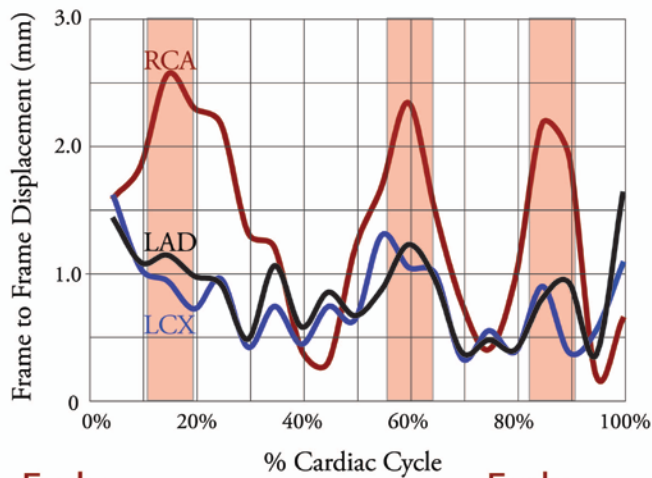
Don't despair. After the heart untwists but before atrial contraction, there is a long period of slow ventricular filling (**thin curved red arrows**) during mid diastole, with little motion.

How about late diastole? There is little movement of blood, it seems that might be a good time to image the coronaries.



True, but the atria squeeze so vigorously that the coronaries move too much. Remember that the RCA and the LCx live in the AV grooves and move with the atria. Watch this movie clip on the right: you will see that mid diastole gives you the longest low motion period and that there is lots of cardiac motion during atrial systole.

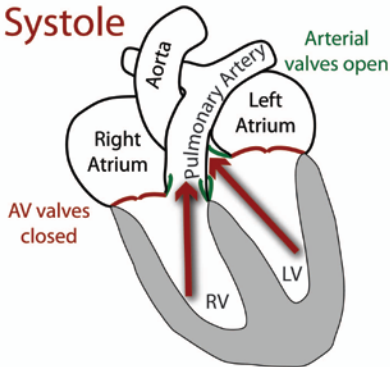




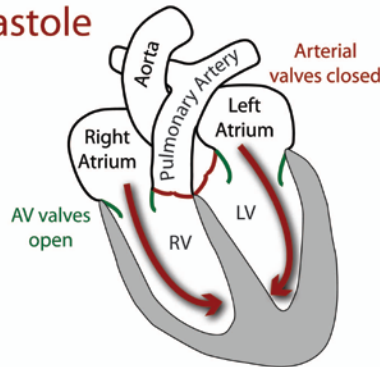
Let's review what we have so far. There are 3 cardiac phases (early systole, early diastole and late diastole) that are unsuitable for imaging because of large amounts of motion. These phases are precisely the ones that we would predict given our knowledge of the cardiac cycle.



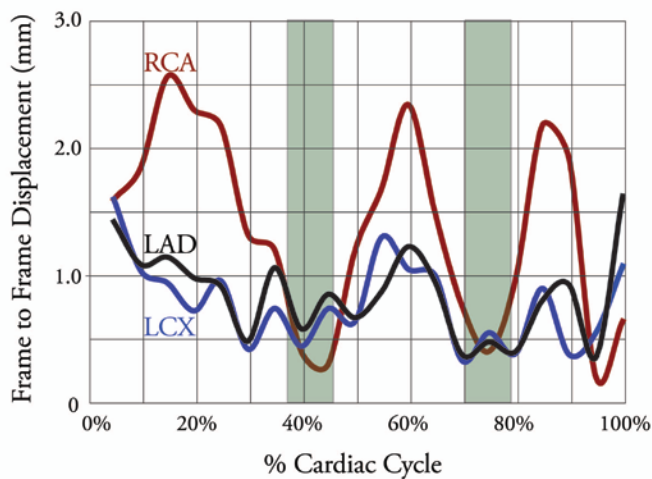
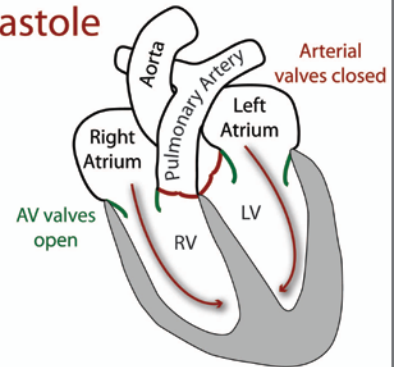
### Early Systole



### Early Diastole



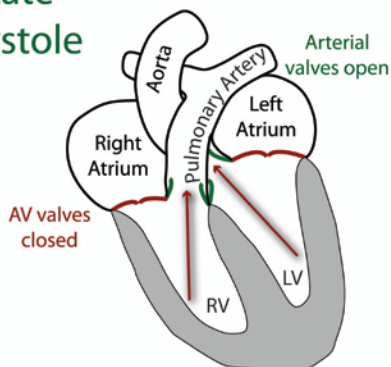
### Late Diastole



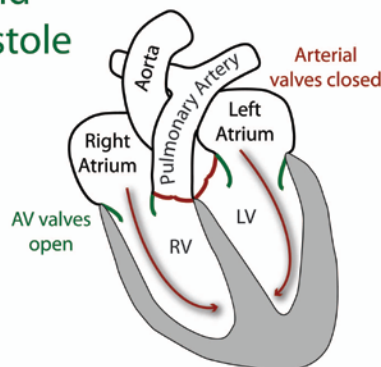
There are 2 low motion phases, again the ones we would predict given our knowledge of the cardiac cycle: late systole and mid diastole. In actual clinical practice, mid diastole works best.



### Late Systole



### Mid Diastole

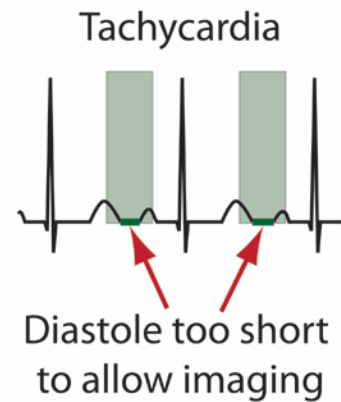
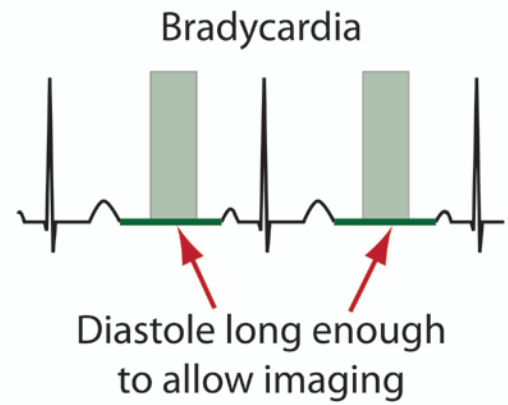


Do we always image during mid diastole?



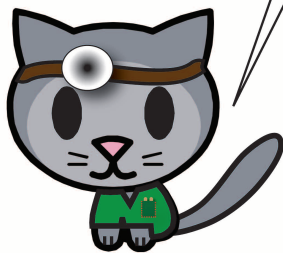


	45 beats per minute	100 beats per minute
Length cardiac cycle	1.33 seconds	0.60 seconds
Length of systole	0.40 seconds (30% of cycle)	0.36 seconds (60% of cycle)
Length of diastole	0.93 seconds (70% of cycle)	0.24 seconds (40% of cycle)

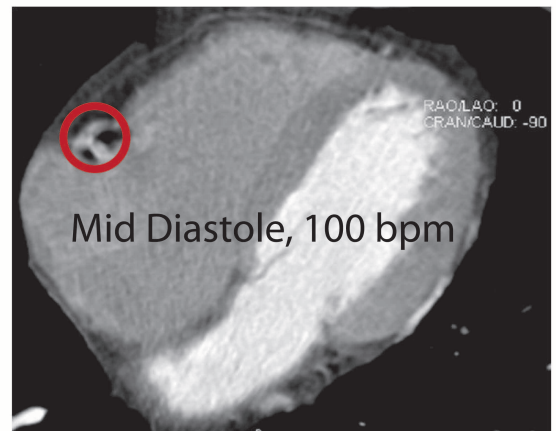
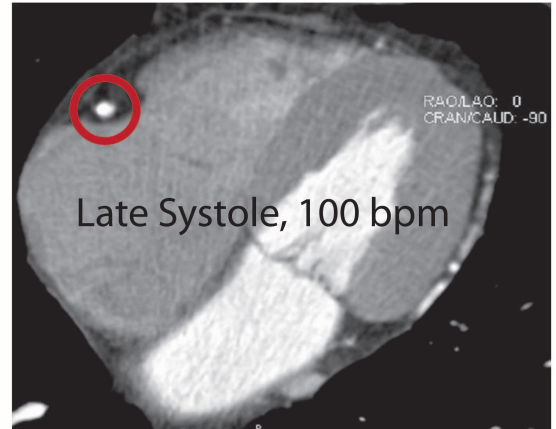


Almost always. The length of systole remains about the same no matter what the heart rate is, but as the heart rate increases diastole gets progressively shorter. When the heart rate gets over 83 beats per minute, the mid diastolic slow ventricular filling phase is shorter than the late systolic slow ventricular ejection phase.

So if patient heart rate is over 83 bpm, you will have to image during late systole.



Correct, but since mid diastole is so much better at low heart rates, we often give Beta blockers to get the heart rate to about 60 bpm. But sometimes you have to use the late systolic phase if you cannot get the heart rate down. These coronary images in a patient with a heart rate of 100 bpm show relatively motion free images in late systole, but lots of motion artifact in diastole. Compare the appearance of the RCA (red circle).

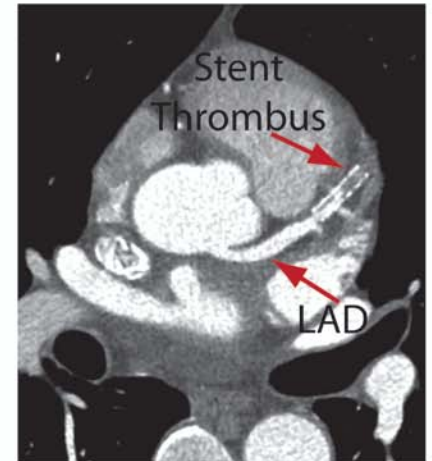
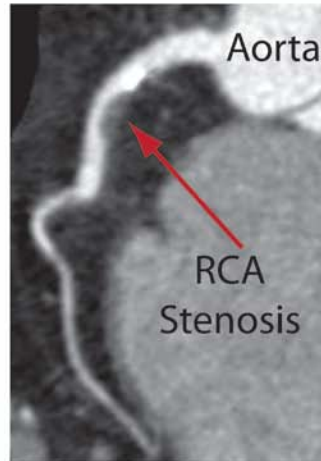
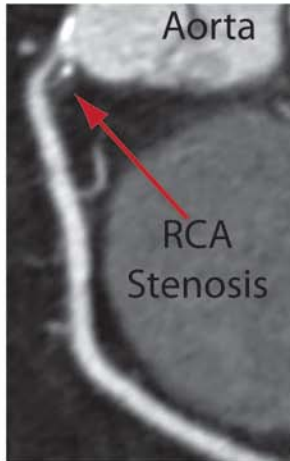
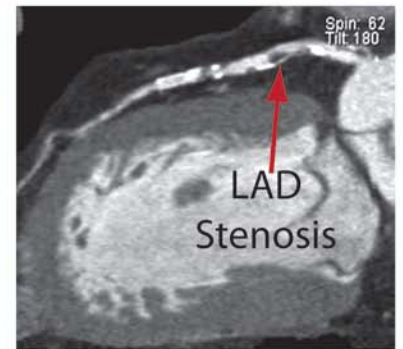




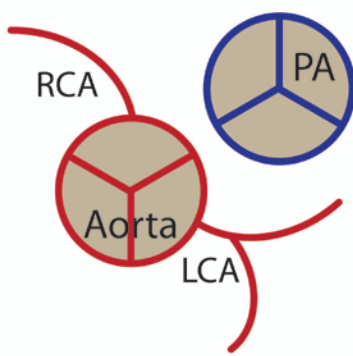
What are the most common indications for coronary CTA?



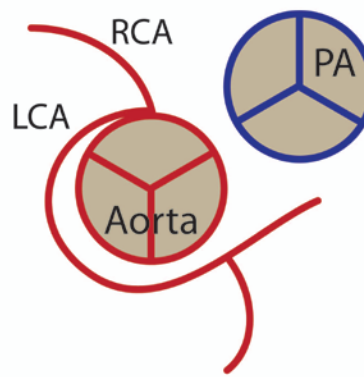
The most common indication is to rule out coronary stenosis. Because the sensitivity of coronary CT is excellent ( $\approx 95\%$ ), some have advocated using coronary CT to rule out stenosis in patients at low risk of coronary stenosis to avoid an invasive standard coronary catheterization.



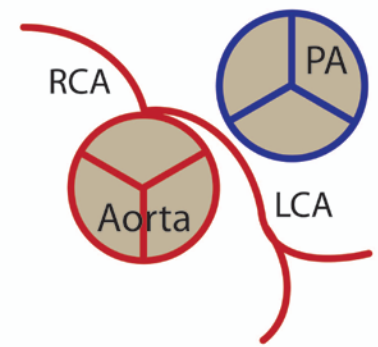
Another common indication is evaluation of a suspected coronary anomaly. As previously shown, the RCA and LCA normally arise separately from the right and left coronary sinuses, but in 1-2% of the population, the coronaries have an anomalous origin. These anomalies are divided into 2 major categories: benign and malignant. Of course, these arteries are not really neoplastic and it might be more accurate to call them dangerous or harmless. Malignant anatomy occurs when a coronary courses between the aorta and the pulmonary artery (PA). An intraarterial course is associated with sudden death, possibly because the anomalous vessel is compressed between the aorta and the pulmonary artery. However, others claim that an oblique origin of the anomalous artery reduces the ostium to a slitlike opening, limiting blood flow. Below and on the next panel are drawings/examples of anomalous origins, but the examples are not exhaustive.



Normal:  
Separate Origins



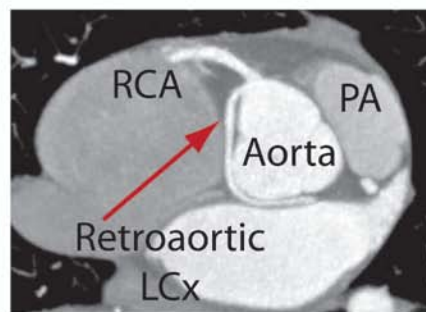
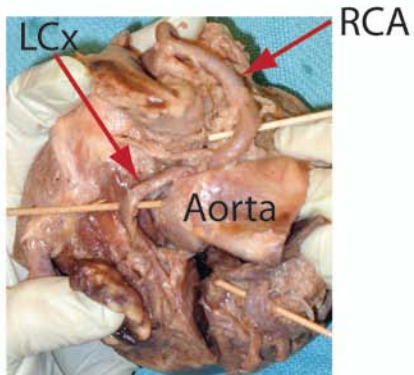
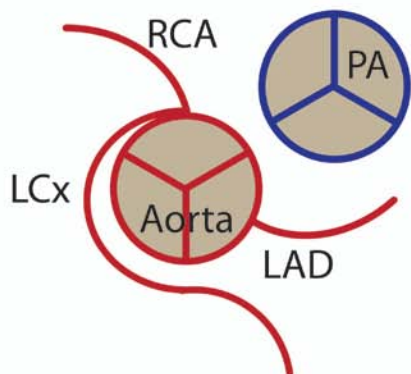
Retroaortic  
LCA: Benign



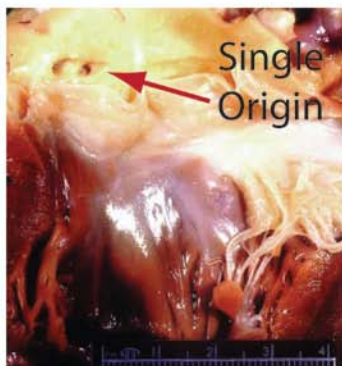
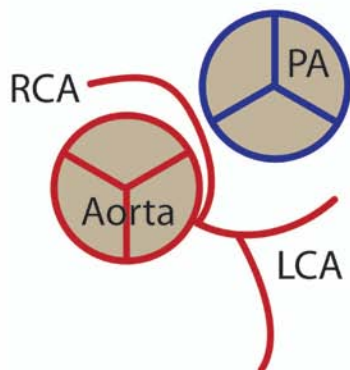
Intraarterial  
LCA: Malignant



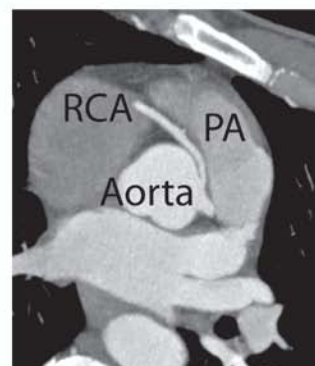
## Retroaortic LCx: Benign



## Intraarterial RCA: Malignant



Crawford  
Cardiology 2004



Do you feel ready to tackle some cases?

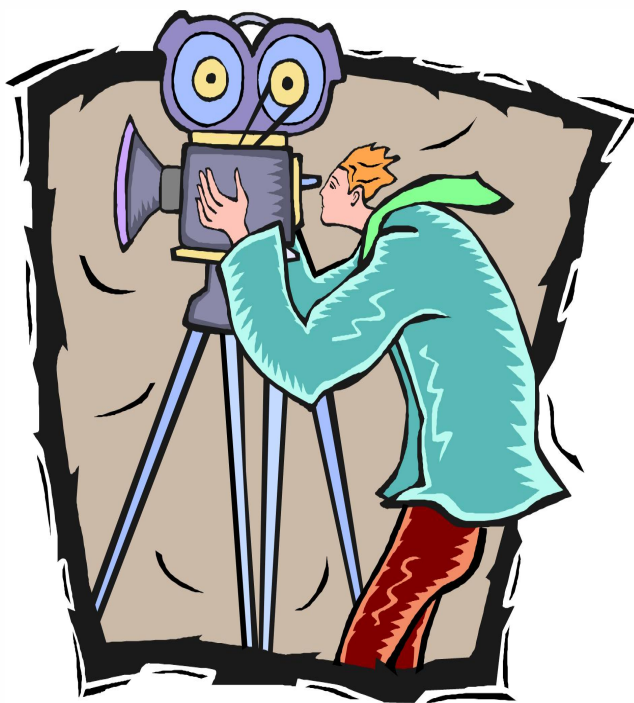


Sure.

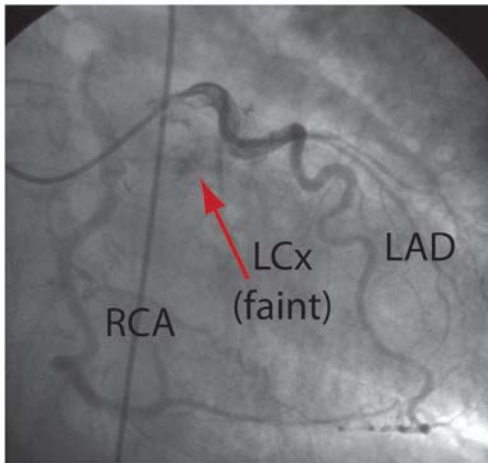
Below is a still from an LCA cath and on the next panel is a cine loop from this LCA cath. What do you see?



## LCA Cath Cine



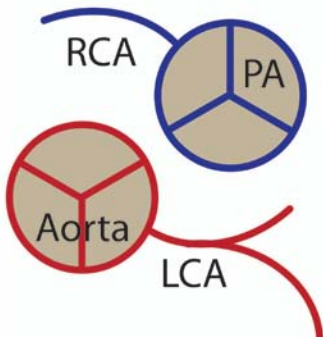
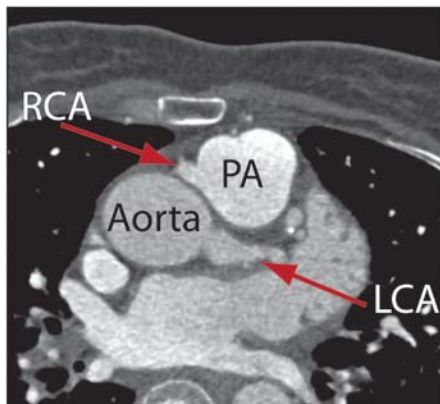
Tricky, huh? What if I told you that the cardiologist was not able to find the RCA in the aorta?



I think I can see the RCA fill late in the injection. It must fill from LAD collaterals.

Let's look at some images from a CT and see if we can figure this out.

Did you figure it out?

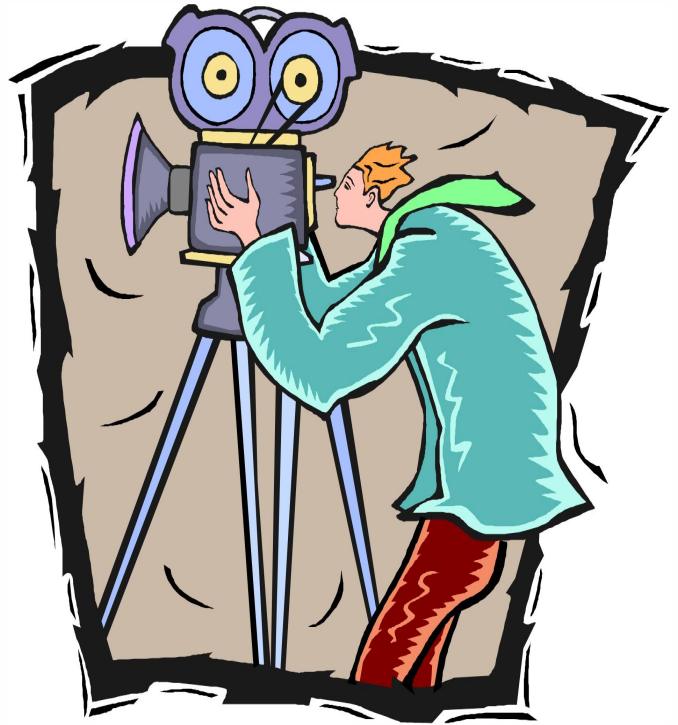


The RCA comes off the PA, wow! That must be rare.

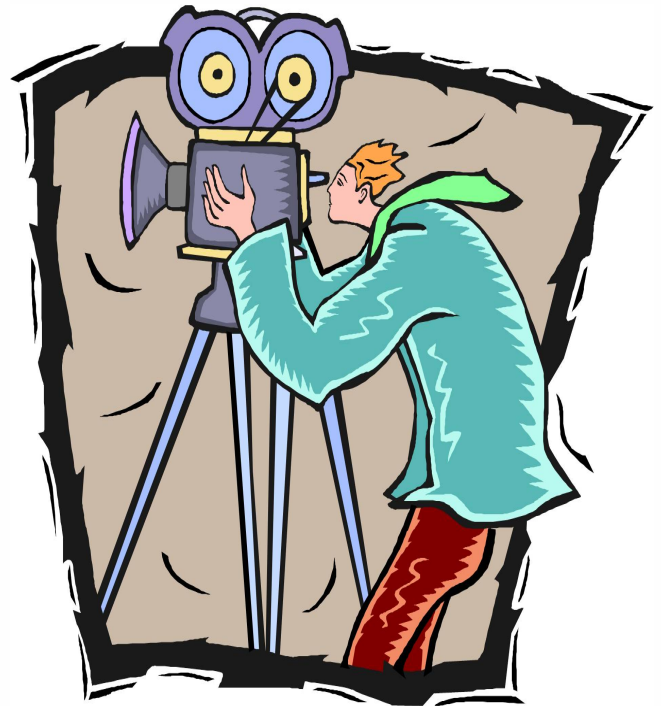
How about the next case?



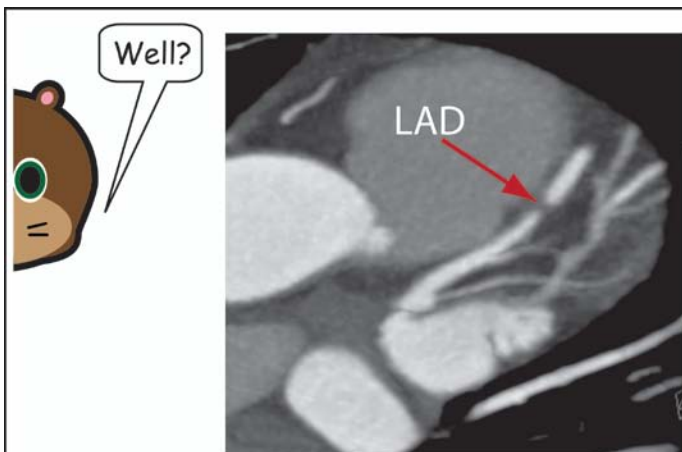
## CT Scan Cine



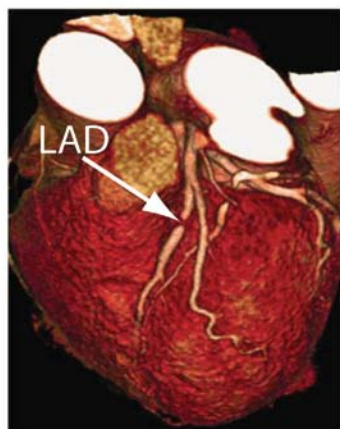
## The next case: CT scan cine



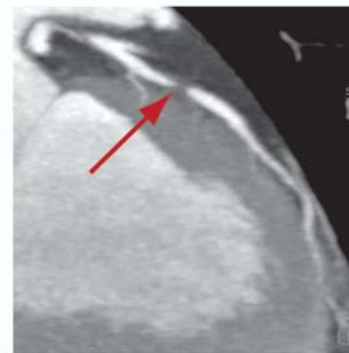
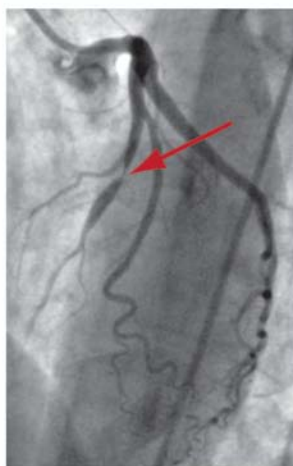




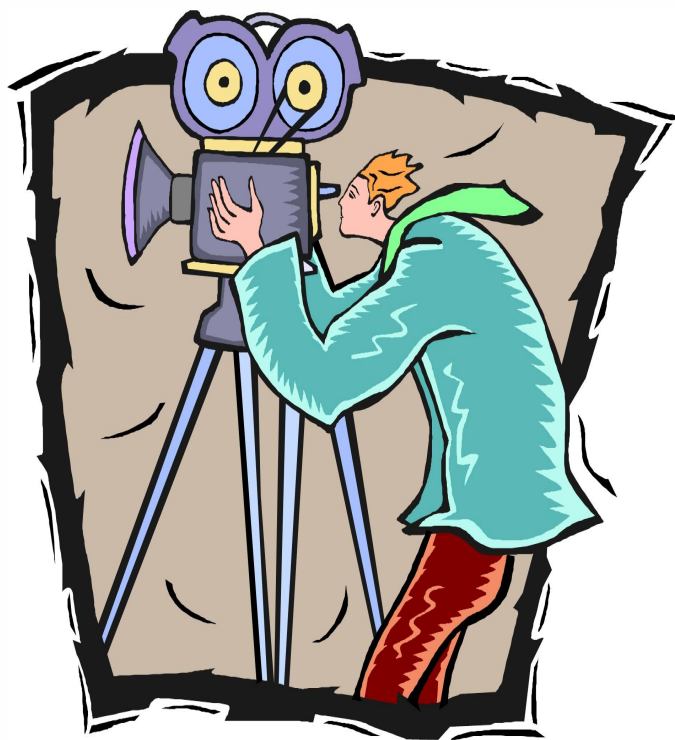
Not quite. If you compare the CT with the cath, you can see a small amount of contrast (red arrow) getting past the apparent LAD occlusion. Standard cath has better spatial resolution than CT, so you can recognize that small residual lumen on the cath but not on the CT. How about trying the last case completely on your own?



The LAD is occluded.



## February/March 2012 Case of the Month



## References, Acknowledgements etc.

Many of the illustrations are modified clipart from Microsoft (Redmond, Washington) Office except "Doc" Squirrel is an original creation. Obviously I borrowed from multiple sources and (usually) gave credit. All artwork was created or modified using Adobe Illustrator CS4 and/or Photoshop CS4 (San Jose, California). Look for more sequels, coming soon!

