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Pulse Sites on the Body

Temporal: The temporal pulse is an easily accessible site that can be used when trying to obtain a pulse on children. It is a useful site when checking for blood flow to the brain, particularly when assessing for signs of head trauma, levels of consciousness or temporal arteritis.

Carotid: The carotid artery is an easily accessible site that is used in cases of physiological shock, cardiac arrest, or when other sites are not palpable. If the condition of a patient worsens, this causes cardiac output to decline. Using the carotid artery site is the best way to assess the pulse because the heart will continue to pump blood through the carotid artery to the brain for as long as possible.

Apical: The apical pulse is one of the most common sites to check for a pulse. If the radial pulse demonstrates dysrhythmias or is covered by a dressing or cast, this is the next best site to test for a pulse. An apical pulse can be tested for patients who take medications that affect the heart rate, giving a more accurate assessment of the heart rate.

Brachial: The brachial pulse is a common site that is used to assess circulation in the arm. It is used a lot when checking for a pulse on infants. When the radial pulse is weak, the brachial pulse can be used and is known for its ease of access and reliability.

Radial: The radial pulse is one of the most common sites to check for a pulse. This site can be used to teach patients how to monitor their own heart rates, especially those who are among athletes, or patients who take cardiac medications. The radial pulse also demonstrates the status of circulation to the hand.

Ulnar: The ulnar pulse can be obtained if the radial artery (the most used site to obtain a pulse) is damaged or removed. It can provide proof of blood flow to the hand. It is a good site to use in a situation where the radial artery is unavailable for use. Testing the ulnar pulse for blood flow to the hand is also called an Allen Test.

Femoral: The femoral pulse can be obtained when assessing blood flow to the lower limbs. It is a common site that is used when assessing a patient who is in shock or has trauma.

Popliteal: The popliteal pulse is a site that is harder to locate, however, it is good to use when peripheral pulses are diminishing. It can be used to assess circulation to the lower leg and foot, specifically when assessing peripheral arterial blockages in the lower extremities or peripheral vascular disease.

Dorsalis Pedis: The dorsalis pedis pulse is a site that is checked to assess blood flow to the foot. It is a helpful site to use routinely for someone who is at risk for diabetes or peripheral artery disease because it would confirm that blood supply to the foot and lower extremities.

Posterior Tibial: The posterior tibial pulse is used to assess blood flow to the lower leg and foot. This site is useful when assessing diabetic patients or patients with vascular conditions with suspected peripheral arterial disease.