QT Interval In The Electrocardiogram (ECG)

Posted on October 29, 2019

The QT interval on an electrocardiogram represents the time from the beginning of ventricular depolarization to the end of ventricular repolarization. It begins at the onset of the QRS complex and ends at the completion of the T wave. The original essay correctly connects QT prolongation with ventricular action-potential duration, medications, and torsades de pointes. However, the interval does not always begin with a visible Q wave, it is not simply the QRS plus an "ST complex," and one universal normal range of 0.36 to 0.44 seconds is insufficient because QT duration varies with heart rate, sex, age, method, lead, and clinical context.

QT interpretation should therefore focus on accurate measurement, heart-rate correction, the complete clinical setting, and change from baseline. Automated values are useful but can be wrong when rhythm is irregular, T waves are abnormal, U waves are present, QRS duration is wide, or signal quality is poor. A clinician evaluating a possible long QT should review the tracing manually and consider electrolytes, medication combinations, congenital syndromes, structural heart disease, and symptoms such as syncope.

Electrical Meaning of the QT Interval

The QRS complex reflects ventricular depolarization, when electrical activation spreads through the ventricles. The ST segment and T wave reflect phases of ventricular repolarization. The QT interval therefore includes depolarization and repolarization rather than measuring repolarization alone.

Most of the clinically important variability in an ordinary narrow-QRS tracing relates to repolarization. When the QRS is prolonged because of bundle-branch block, ventricular pacing, pre-excitation, or intraventricular conduction delay, the QT becomes longer partly because depolarization itself is longer. In that setting, the JT interval or other adjusted approaches may provide additional information.

Ventricular Action Potential

Cardiac myocytes generate action potentials through coordinated movement of sodium, calcium, and potassium ions. Rapid inward sodium current initiates depolarization in ventricular muscle. Calcium entry contributes to the plateau, while several outward potassium currents restore the resting electrical state.

QT prolongation can occur when outward repolarizing current is reduced or inward current persists. Many drugs associated with QT prolongation inhibit the rapid component of the delayed rectifier potassium current, often described through the hERG or KCNH2 channel. Congenital long-QT syndromes can result from variants affecting potassium, sodium, calcium, or associated channel proteins.

ECG Paper and Time

At the standard paper speed of 25 millimeters per second, one small box equals 0.04 seconds, or 40 milliseconds, and one large box equals 0.20 seconds. At 50 millimeters per second, each small box equals 20 milliseconds. The paper speed must therefore be checked before counting boxes.

The QT is measured from the earliest onset of the QRS complex to the end of the T wave in the selected lead. The value is usually recorded in milliseconds. Measurements should not begin at the Q wave specifically when the first deflection is an R wave.

Selecting a Lead

A lead with a clearly defined T-wave ending should be selected. Lead II is commonly used, and precordial leads may be helpful. The original essay recommends aVL because U waves may be less prominent there, but no single lead is mandatory in every tracing. The chosen lead should provide a stable baseline and a T wave that can be distinguished from noise and U-wave activity.

Serial measurements should ideally use the same method and lead when possible. Switching leads can create apparent change because T-wave morphology differs. In a formal assessment, several leads may be reviewed and the longest clearly measurable QT considered according to the protocol being used.

Identifying the End of the T Wave

The end of the T wave can be difficult to identify when the wave is flat, notched, biphasic, merged with a U wave, or distorted by artifact. One common method is the tangent approach: a tangent is drawn along the steepest terminal portion of the T wave, and its intersection with the isoelectric baseline marks the end.

A distinct U wave should not normally be included in the QT. When the T and U waves fuse and cannot be separated, measurement becomes uncertain and should be interpreted cautiously. A notched T wave may require including the second component when it is part of the T wave rather than a separate U wave.

Manual and Automated Measurement

Modern ECG machines calculate QT and QTc automatically. Automated measurement improves consistency and speed but should not be accepted blindly. Algorithms may misidentify QRS onset or T-wave end, particularly during atrial fibrillation, premature beats, low-amplitude waves, pacing, bundle-branch block, or artifact.

Manual review is especially important when the reported QTc is markedly prolonged, when a medication decision depends on the result, or when the value conflicts with visual appearance. The measurement should be repeated rather than adjusted to match expectation.

Heart-Rate Dependence

QT duration generally shortens as heart rate increases and lengthens as heart rate slows. The original essay reverses part of this relationship by saying a rapid rate “suppresses” the QT without explaining correction. Comparing raw QT values across different rates can therefore be misleading.

A corrected QT, or QTc, estimates what the interval might be at a standardized heart rate. Correction formulas are approximations, not direct measurements. They can overcorrect or undercorrect, especially at very fast or slow rates.

Bazett Formula

The formula presented in the original essay is Bazett’s correction:

$QTc = QT / \sqrt{RR}$

QT and RR must be expressed in seconds for the usual calculation. Bazett’s formula is widely used and often printed by ECG machines. It tends to overestimate QTc at high heart rates and underestimate it at low heart rates. A value should therefore not be interpreted without knowing the formula. (American Heart Association, 2025)

Fridericia and Other Corrections

Fridericia’s formula divides QT by the cube root of RR. It often performs better than Bazett at rates away from 60 beats per minute and is commonly used in drug studies. Framingham and Hodges corrections use linear relationships. No formula is perfect for every population.

When serial ECGs have substantially different rates, calculating more than one correction or using the formula preferred by the relevant guideline can prevent overreaction to a formula artifact. Clinical reports should specify the method.

Normal and Abnormal Values

There is no single universally normal QTc threshold. Common clinical cutoffs often consider values above approximately 450 milliseconds in adult men and above approximately 460 milliseconds in adult women prolonged, while values of 500 milliseconds or more are associated with greater torsades risk. Thresholds vary among sources, populations, and circumstances.

A borderline value is not a diagnosis of congenital long-QT syndrome. Likewise, a QTc below 500 does not eliminate risk when there is a large increase from baseline, severe electrolyte disturbance, interacting drugs, or a history of syncope. Trends and context matter.

Short QT

QT abnormalities include shortening as well as prolongation. A very short QT can occur with hypercalcemia, certain drugs, or congenital short-QT syndrome. Short-QT syndrome can also predispose to atrial and ventricular arrhythmias.

The original article focuses on prolongation, which is more commonly discussed in medication safety, but a complete interpretation should recognize both extremes.

Congenital Long-QT Syndrome

Congenital long-QT syndrome is a group of inherited channel disorders that can cause delayed repolarization, syncope, torsades de pointes, and sudden cardiac death. Different genetic types may be triggered by exercise, emotional stress, auditory stimuli, sleep, or other conditions, though patterns are not absolute.

Diagnosis uses ECG findings, personal and family history, symptoms, and sometimes genetic testing. A normal QTc on one tracing does not completely exclude the condition because penetrance and expression vary. Family screening may be needed when a pathogenic variant or strong clinical diagnosis is present.

Acquired QT Prolongation

Acquired QT prolongation is more common and often results from medication, electrolyte disturbance, bradycardia, organ dysfunction, or combinations of factors. Hypokalemia, hypomagnesemia, and hypocalcemia can affect repolarization. Renal or hepatic impairment may increase drug concentrations.

Risk often emerges through accumulation. One medication may produce modest QT change, but the combination of several QT-prolonging drugs, vomiting-related hypokalemia, bradycardia, and impaired metabolism can become dangerous.

Medication Classes

Drugs associated with QT prolongation include some antiarrhythmics, antipsychotics, antidepressants, antibiotics, antiemetics, antihistamines, opioids, antimalarials, and oncology agents. Risk differs substantially within each class and according to dose, route, concentration, and patient factors.

The original essay suggests that many categories have been removed from the market. Some drugs such as terfenadine and astemizole were withdrawn after serious interaction-related arrhythmia risk, but numerous QT-prolonging medications remain useful when prescribed appropriately. Prolongation does not automatically require market withdrawal.

Drug Interactions

A pharmacokinetic interaction can inhibit metabolism and raise the concentration of a QT-prolonging drug. Terfenadine and astemizole became classic examples because metabolism inhibition increased cardiac risk. Interactions may also involve renal clearance or transport.

Pharmacodynamic interaction occurs when several drugs affect repolarization independently. A complete medication review should include prescriptions, over-the-counter products, supplements, and recently discontinued drugs with long half-lives.

Torsades de Pointes

Torsades de pointes is a polymorphic ventricular tachycardia associated with prolonged repolarization. On ECG, the QRS complexes appear to twist around the baseline. Episodes may stop spontaneously, cause syncope, recur, or degenerate into ventricular fibrillation.

QT prolongation creates vulnerability but does not guarantee torsades. The arrhythmia often involves early afterdepolarizations and pause-dependent initiation. Bradycardia, long-short sequences, female sex, structural heart disease, electrolyte disturbance, and high drug exposure can increase risk.

Symptoms

QT prolongation itself may produce no symptoms. Torsades or related arrhythmia can cause palpitations, lightheadedness, seizures from transient cerebral hypoperfusion, syncope, or cardiac arrest. Unexplained fainting during exercise, emotion, sudden sound, or medication change requires evaluation.

Seizure-like activity should not always be assumed neurological when arrhythmia is possible. A family history of sudden unexplained death may be important.

Clinical Risk Factors

Risk factors include older age, female sex, bradycardia, heart failure, myocardial infarction, congenital channel disease, electrolyte loss, renal or hepatic impairment, high drug dose, rapid intravenous administration, and multiple QT-prolonging medicines. Acute illness can change risk quickly. (U.S. Food and Drug Administration, 2025)

Sex-based cutoffs reflect average electrophysiological differences but should not be used rigidly or disrespectfully. Clinical interpretation should consider physiology, treatment, and the individual rather than assuming risk from identity alone.

Wide QRS Complex

When the QRS is wide, the QT includes prolonged depolarization and may overstate repolarization abnormality. Bundle-branch block and pacing therefore complicate QTc interpretation. The JT interval, measured from the end of QRS to the end of T, may be considered with an appropriate correction.

There are several proposed adjustment methods, and specialist consultation may be appropriate. A machine-generated QTc in a paced rhythm should not be interpreted as though the QRS were normal.

Irregular Rhythms

Atrial fibrillation creates variable RR intervals, making correction difficult. Several beats may be measured and averaged or selected according to a validated method. Premature beats and the beats immediately following them should generally be avoided because cycle-length changes distort repolarization.

The rhythm and measurement method should be documented. One isolated beat may not represent the tracing.

Monitoring Before Medication

Before initiating a higher-risk drug, clinicians may review baseline ECG, electrolytes, renal and hepatic function, cardiac history, family history, and interacting medications. Not every medicine requires an ECG for every patient. Monitoring intensity should match the drug and risk profile.

Repeat ECG may be considered after the drug reaches steady state, after a dose increase, when another interacting drug is added, or when symptoms develop. The purpose is prevention, not collection of numbers without action thresholds.

Responding to Prolongation

Management depends on severity and cause. Possible steps include stopping or reducing an offending drug, correcting potassium or magnesium, treating bradycardia, addressing overdose, and using continuous monitoring. Decisions must consider the benefit of the medication and alternatives.

A patient should not stop an essential medicine independently based on an automated ECG message. Abrupt discontinuation can also be dangerous. Prompt clinical review is appropriate.

Acute Torsades Management

Unstable or pulseless ventricular arrhythmia requires immediate resuscitation and defibrillation according to emergency protocols. Intravenous magnesium is commonly used for torsades even when serum magnesium is not severely low. Recurrent pause-dependent episodes may require increasing heart rate through pacing or medication under specialist care. (American Heart Association, 2025)

Long-term treatment depends on whether the cause is acquired or congenital. Emergency management should be performed by trained professionals.

Drug Development and Regulation

Regulators require evaluation of a new medicine's potential to delay ventricular repolarization. FDA and international guidance address nonclinical ion-channel testing, clinical QT/QTc assessment, concentration-response analysis, and labeling. The objective is to understand proarrhythmic risk before broad use. (U.S. Food and Drug Administration, 2022)

A small average QT effect does not fully predict rare arrhythmia, and a molecular channel effect does not always translate directly to clinical danger. Modern assessment integrates nonclinical, pharmacokinetic, ECG, and clinical-event evidence.

Common Measurement Errors

Errors include beginning at the wrong point, including a U wave, ignoring paper speed, using a noisy lead, measuring after a premature beat, confusing QT with QTc, and accepting the machine without review. Unit errors can also occur when milliseconds and seconds are mixed in a formula.

The statement that faster heart rate makes QT "slower" should be avoided. Raw QT generally becomes shorter with faster rate, while Bazett-corrected QTc may appear falsely high because of overcorrection.

Documentation

A useful report records rhythm, heart rate, raw QT, RR interval, correction formula, QTc, lead, QRS duration, and reason for concern. Medication and electrolyte context should be included. Serial reports should distinguish a true change from a different method.

Documentation supports communication among clinicians and prevents a borderline value from becoming an unexplained permanent label.

Patient Education

Patients with diagnosed long-QT syndrome or significant medication risk should understand symptoms requiring urgent care, the importance of medication review, and the danger of using another person's drugs. They should inform clinicians and pharmacists about the condition.

Education should avoid creating fear of every medication. Many drugs can be used safely with appropriate selection and monitoring. Reliable, regularly updated drug-risk resources are preferable to unverified lists.

Conclusion

The QT interval extends from the beginning of the QRS complex to the end of the T wave and represents ventricular depolarization plus repolarization. Measurement requires correct paper speed, a clear lead, identification of T-wave ending, and exclusion of a separate U wave. Automated values should be reviewed when clinical decisions depend on them.

Because QT varies with heart rate, clinicians use QTc formulas such as Bazett or Fridericia. Bazett is common but can overcorrect at fast rates and undercorrect at slow rates. No single universal normal range applies to every person. Values near or above 500 milliseconds, large changes from baseline, symptoms, and multiple risk factors require particular attention.

QT prolongation may be congenital or acquired through medicines, interactions, electrolytes, bradycardia, or disease. It increases vulnerability to torsades de pointes but does not guarantee arrhythmia. Safe interpretation combines the ECG with medication history, laboratory values, symptoms, QRS duration, rhythm, and clinical judgment.

References

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