

Atrial fibrillation

The heart usually beats in a regular rhythm. Atrial fibrillation (AF) occurs when the upper chambers of the heart (the atria) beat in an irregular and uncoordinated way, called fibrillation. The heart rate in AF may sometimes be much faster than normal.

Three to six million people in the United States have AF. Although it usually occurs in people over 60, it can occur in younger adults too.

What symptoms can AF cause?

People with AF may feel their heart pounding or palpitating, or note an irregular pulse.

AF may also cause:

- weakness
- chest discomfort
- inability to exercise
- dizziness
- shortness of breath
- fainting

However, some people with AF don't have any symptoms at all.

Because the atria are not beating normally, AF increases the risk that a blood clot may form in the heart. These clots can flow up to the brain and cause a stroke. The good news is that the risk of stroke with AF can be substantially reduced with proper management.

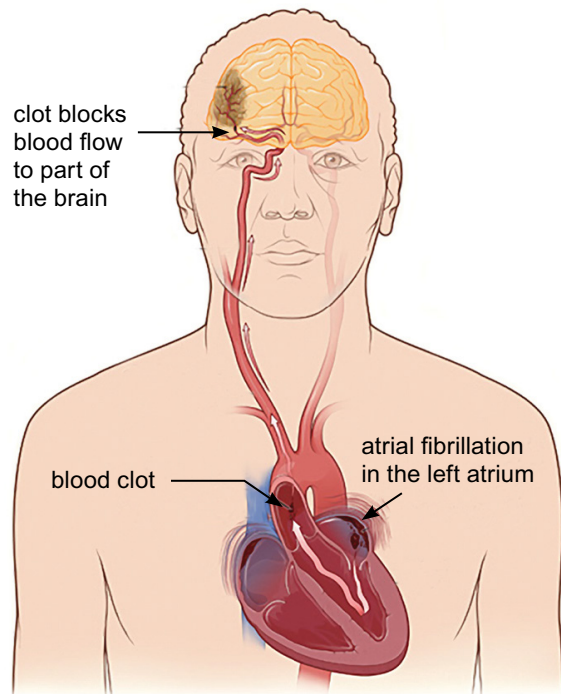


Image: National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, National Institutes of Health

Preventing blood clots and stroke

Preventing clots is one of the most important parts of managing AF. Untreated AF raises the risk of stroke, because clots that form in the atria can break off and flow to the brain. However, anticoagulant medications (“blood thinners”) can **reduce that risk by two-thirds**. Several drugs, such as aspirin and warfarin (Coumadin), reduce the blood’s capacity to clot, and this lowers the risk of stroke.

Newer anticoagulant drugs such as dabigatran (Pradaxa), rivaroxaban (Xarelto), apixaban (Eliquis), and edoxaban (Savaysa) require less monitoring than warfarin.

The decision on whether to use a drug, and which drug to use, is based on your risk of stroke and other factors. All these medicines can cause bleeding and have to be monitored by your doctor.

Controlling heart rate

Several medicines can slow down the heart rate in AF if it is too rapid. These include beta-blockers, calcium channel blockers, and digoxin. Your doctor can decide which is best for you.

Controlling heart rhythm

Some medications can help the heart go back into a normal rhythm. They may not be needed for people whose heart rates can be slowed down enough with heart rate medications.

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Other treatments

If AF is not controlled with drugs, several procedures can help the heart return to a normal rhythm. These include giving an electric shock through the skin (cardioversion) or doing an invasive procedure known as ablation therapy to eliminate the abnormal heart rhythm.

What else can I do?

- 1 Take your medications as prescribed.
- 2 Talk to your health care provider before stopping any medications.

Want to know more?

Visit our website at AlosaHealth.org/modules/Afib for resources from:

- American Heart Association
 - Heart Rhythm Society
 - American Stroke Association
 - American College of Cardiology
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These are general recommendations only; specific clinical decisions should be made by the treating physician based on an individual patient's clinical condition.

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