

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.

About nine 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 greatly reduced with proper management.



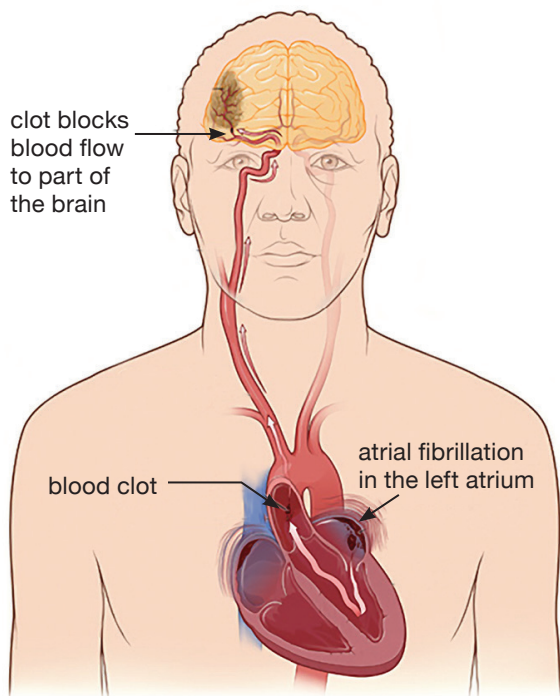
How is atrial fibrillation (AF) diagnosed?

Your healthcare professional might order an electrocardiogram (ECG) or cardiac monitor to assess your heart rhythm. You may also be asked questions to assess your risk of stroke. This will help decide what treatment might be best for you.

How is AF treated?

There are three major goals in managing AF in most patients:

1. Prevent stroke.
2. Keep the heart rate in a normal range and possibly restore a normal rhythm.
3. Treat any other medical conditions that may be making the AF worse.



Preventing 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 half**.

Several drugs reduce the blood’s ability to clot, which lowers the risk of stroke. These medications include:

- apixaban (Eliquis)
- dabigatran (Pradaxa)
- edoxaban (Savaysa)
- rivaroxaban (Xarelto)
- warfarin (Coumadin)

Based on your risk of stroke and other factors, your healthcare professional will help you decide which option is best for you.

Controlling heart rate

Several medicines can slow down the heart rate in AF if it is too rapid.



These include beta-blockers (e.g., metoprolol), calcium channel blockers (e.g., diltiazem, verapamil), and digoxin.

Controlling heart rhythm

Medications can help the heart go back into a normal rhythm.

For some patients, a procedure can treat AF. These procedures could include giving an electric shock through the skin (cardioversion) or threading a catheter through a vein and into the heart where the source of AF is cauterized (ablation) to treat the abnormal heart rhythm.

Your doctor may refer you to a cardiologist to discuss controlling your heart rhythm with medications and procedures.

What else can I do?



Keep blood pressure controlled (< 130/80)



Lose weight if appropriate



Stop or reduce alcohol use



Stop smoking



Use your CPAP machine if you have sleep apnea

This program is supported by the PACE Program of the Department of Aging of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. This material is provided by Alosa Health, a nonprofit organization which accepts no funding from any pharmaceutical company.

These are general recommendations only; specific clinical decisions should be made by the treating clinician based on an individual patient's clinical condition.

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PACE

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Nov 2024
AH-001-0040