

ATRIAL FIBRILLATION

Atrial fibrillation is one of the most common types of arrhythmias or abnormal heart rhythms. It leads to an irregular heartbeat. The irregular heartbeat does not allow the heart to fill and pump normal.

Causes

The heart is made of 4 chambers. Electrical activity is very organized in the heart and triggers the heart to beat/contract in a regular pattern. In atrial fibrillation, the electrical activity of the heart is irregular. This makes the chambers of the heart contract in an irregular pattern. The heart is unable to fill and pump blood out to meet the body's needs.

Common causes for atrial fibrillation include:

- Alcohol use (especially drinking a lot in 1 setting such as 4 or more drinks for women or 5 or more drinks for men in 2 hours)
- Coronary artery disease
- Heart attack
- Heart valve disease (such as problems with the mitral valve)
- High blood pressure
- Certain medicines
- Overactive thyroid gland
- Pericarditis (inflammation of the heart lining)

Some risk factors, or certain things that can increase the chance of you having atrial fibrillation are:

- Getting older, especially if over age 65
- Family history of atrial fibrillation as it can run in families
- Other health conditions – diabetes, obesity, chronic kidney disease, copd and other chronic lung disease, and sleep apnea
- Recent surgery within days or weeks on the heart, lungs, or esophagus

Symptoms

- Fatigue/tiredness
- Feeling a rapid, racing, pounding, fluttering, thumping or irregular pulse/heartbeat
- Palpitations – sensation of feeling heartbeat
- Low blood pressure
- Dizziness, lightheadedness
- Passing out
- Weakness
- Difficulty breathing or shortness of breath
- Chest pain, discomfort, pressure that can be a sign of a heart attack and requires calling 911 and seeking medical attention right away

Diagnosis

Your healthcare provider will ask you questions about symptoms, lifestyle choices, other medical conditions you may have and your family history of atrial fibrillation. Your doctor will listen to your heart and often order an EKG (electrocardiogram). The EKG is a tracing of the electrical activity of your heart

and shows what type of rhythm your heart is in. Sometimes your EKG can be normal and they ask you to wear a heart monitor for days or weeks to see if you have atrial fibrillation. Your doctor may also order an ultrasound of your heart to look at the 4 areas of your heart and the heart valves.

Treatment

Involves a combination of heart healthy lifestyle changes, medications, and possibly procedures.

Common medications include:

- **Beta blockers** (i.e. metoprolol, bisoprolol, carvedilol, nebivolol) decrease rate of heartbeat and the force that the heart uses to pump blood.
- **Calcium channel blockers** (i.e. diltiazem, verapamil) slow heart rate and decrease the force of the heart muscle to contract
- **Digoxin** slows the electrical activity of the heart
- **Heart rhythm-controlling medications** (i.e. flecainide, propafenone, amiodarone, sotalol, dofetilide) act to slow down electrical activity of the heart
- **Anticoagulants** (e.g. apixaban, dabigatran, rivaroxaban, warfarin) – blood thinners to decrease clots forming in the heart that can lead to stroke

Managing atrial fibrillation involves a combination of lifestyle changes and medical care to control the condition and reduce the risk of stroke. Here are the key components:

1. Heart-Healthy Lifestyle:

- o **Healthy Eating:** Follow a diet like the DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) eating plan or the Mediterranean diet.
- o **Limit Alcohol:** Reduce or avoid alcohol consumption.
- o **Regular Physical Activity:** Engage in regular exercise as recommended by your doctor.
- o **Stress Reduction:** Practice stress management techniques.
- o **Quit Smoking:** Stop smoking to improve heart health.

2. Medications:

- o **Heart Rate and Rhythm Control:** Medications to manage heart rate and rhythm.
- o **Blood Thinners:** Medications to prevent blood clots that can lead to strokes.

3. Procedures:

- o **Cardioversion:** A procedure to reset the heart's rhythm by delivering a controlled electric shock.
- o **Pacemaker:** Surgery to implant a device that helps control heart rate.
- o **Maze Procedure:** Surgery to create scar tissue in the heart to block abnormal electrical signals.
- o **Left Atrial Appendage Closure:** A device placed in the heart to prevent clots from leaving the heart if blood thinners are not an option.

These strategies, combined with regular medical care, can help manage AFib effectively.

Support Groups

American Heart Association [Home https://supportnetwork.heart.org/s/](https://supportnetwork.heart.org/s/)

For additional information, check out:

[Atrial fibrillation and atrial flutter: MedlinePlus Medical Encyclopedia](#)

<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/000184.htm>; [Atrial Fibrillation | AFib | MedlinePlus](#)

<https://medlineplus.gov/atrialfibrillation.html>

[Atrial Fibrillation | American Heart Association](#) <https://www.heart.org/en/health-topics/atrial-fibrillation/>