

Atrial Fibrillation

Risk Factors/Causes

- Age
- Family history
- High blood pressure
- Existing cardiovascular diseases/conditions
- Recent heart surgery
- Lung disease
- Thyroid problems
- Severe infections
- Obesity
- Diabetes
- Alcohol or caffeine consumption
- Drug use—stimulants or steroids
- Extreme emotional or physical stress
- Sleep apnea
- Metabolic syndrome
- Kidney disease

The facts about **AFib**

The most common type of arrhythmia—or abnormal heart rhythm—atrial fibrillation (AFib) is a disorder of the heart’s electrical system that affects an estimated 2.3 to 5.6 million people in the US. During AFib episodes the heart’s upper chambers (the atria) beat irregularly and out of sync with the heart’s lower chambers (the ventricles). In some people these episodes come and go. In others they are chronic and occur regularly. In both cases, the arrhythmia itself isn’t generally serious; however, abnormal blood flow and strain to the heart can lead to serious medical conditions.

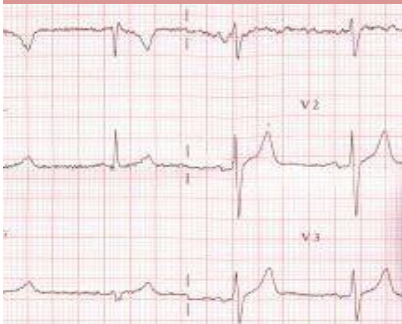
What it Means to Have AFib

In a normal heart, electrical impulses cause the different chambers to contract in an organized manner, pumping blood through the heart and out to the body. During AFib, chaotic and disorganized electrical impulses inefficiently pump the blood. This abnormal rhythm is often felt as palpitations, a racing heart rate, and even chest pain.

If severe, the body doesn’t get enough oxygen—leading to fatigue, weakness, lightheadedness, confusion, and shortness of breath. In these cases, the heart ends up working overtime to try to compensate for the poor pumping and eventually becomes enlarged and diseased. It can literally wear out and leave the person in congestive heart failure. While the damage can often be repaired—and the heart even replaced—this is a serious complication that can be fatal.

Stroke risk is also extremely high—around 15% of all strokes are in people with AFib. The irregular rhythm doesn’t allow the heart to pump out all the blood between beats. Some of it can be left behind to pool and clot in the chambers of the heart. A clot that forms in the heart can then be pumped out and lodge somewhere else. If it makes its way to an artery in the brain it blocks off blood flow and causes a stroke. Strokes are often deadly and those that survive can face long-term disabilities.

If you think you may have AFib, contact your health care professional. Keep in mind that not all people with AFib have symptoms so if you are at risk, get a regular exam.



Treating AFib

Restoring a Normal Rhythm & Rate

Medications and lifestyle changes may restore the normal heart rhythm and rate in some patients. Others may need procedures or surgery to get their heart beat back to normal:

- **Electrical cardioversion**—an electric shock can “reset” the heart and return it to a normal rhythm.
- **Catheter ablation**—a burst of energy is delivered through a catheter in a blood vessel, destroying the heart tissue that is triggering abnormal electrical signals.
- **Pacemaker**—a device implanted under the skin controls the rate and rhythm of the heart with electrical impulses.
- **Maze & Mini-Maze procedures**—incisions, cryotherapy (freezing), laser, and other techniques are used to create scar tissue on the heart muscle that interrupts abnormal impulses. The Mini-Maze procedure is less invasive than the more traditional Maze.

Preventing Stroke

Anticoagulant and antiplatelet medications make the blood less likely to clot—reducing stroke risk by as much as 80%.

While these drugs lower stroke risk, they raise the risk of bleeding. Because the blood doesn't clot well, injuries can lead to uncontrolled bleeding. Internal bleeding, or hemorrhaging, can also lead to serious problems if it occurs in the gastro-intestinal system or brain. It's especially important that health care professionals accurately assess the stroke AND bleeding risk of an individual before making a treatment decision.

Warfarin is the most commonly used anticoagulant, although dabigatran was recently approved by the FDA and similar drugs are expected soon. Warfarin can be complicated to manage and patients and experts are hoping that these new drugs will be easier to take and less risky. If you or a loved one has AFib, be sure to talk to a health care professional about the best treatment options.

Making the Right Treatment Decision for You

- Don't be afraid to ask questions
- Do your homework and learn about your options
- Be open and honest about what works for you and what doesn't
- Keep records of your medical visits, tests, medications, symptoms, and questions
- Don't be afraid to get a second opinion
- Talk to your relatives about family history
- Remember—making the best treatment decision is a team effort



Additional Resources

- [Clot Care.org](http://ClotCare.org)
- [Heart Rhythm Society](http://HeartRhythmSociety.org)
- [Mended Hearts](http://MendedHearts.org)
- [National Stroke Association](http://NationalStrokeAssociation.org)
- StopAfib.org
- [Stop the Clot](http://StopTheClot.org)