



Atrial Fibrillation

What is Atrial Fibrillation?

The heart is divided into 4 sections called chambers. These four chambers usually beat in a steady, rhythmic pattern. Atrial fibrillation or AFib means that the atria (the upper chambers of the heart) are fibrillating or twitching quickly and creating an irregular rhythm. When this happens, the atria cannot properly pump blood to the rest of the heart or body. Your heart may not beat in this abnormal pattern all the time. You may go into Afib from time to time. This may happen often or quite rarely.

The normal heart rate for an adult is between 60 and 100 beats every minute. When the heart is in AFib, the atria can beat over 300 times every minute.

What causes AFib?

Some people who are living healthy lives and have no other medical problems do develop AFib. In most cases, though, we do know the cause. The most common causes and risk factors include:

- Thyroid disease
- High blood pressure
- Heart and heart valve disease
- Acute (sudden) or chronic (ongoing) respiratory illness
- Heart failure
- Past open heart surgery
- Past heart attack(s)

What are the symptoms of AFib?

The symptoms of AFib are different for each person. Many people feel no symptoms at all. They do not even know they are in AFib or that there is a problem. Others can tell as soon as it begins. This is because the symptoms depend on age, the cause of the AFib (heart problems, other diseases, etc.) and on how much the AFib affects the pumping of the heart. The symptoms of AFib include:

- Palpitations (feeling like your heart is racing, pounding, or fluttering)
- Dizziness, lightheadedness or fainting
- Chest pain
- Fatigue (a tired feeling)
- Shortness of breath
- Weakness
- Pulse that is faster than normal or changing between fast and slow
- Pain, pressure, tightness, or discomfort in your chest



Can AFib cause other health problems?

AFib itself is not life threatening. If it goes untreated, it can cause problems that may be.

- *Stroke:* AFib makes it harder for the atria (the upper chambers of the heart) to pump blood to the ventricles (the lower chambers of the heart). Because the atria cannot empty properly in atrial fibrillation, the blood collects in the atria and may form clots. If a clot is pumped out of the heart, it could travel to the brain and lead to a stroke. In fact, having atrial fibrillation increases the risk of stroke by 5 times. Strokes are dangerous and can lead to brain damage or death. Afib is the cause of more than 80,000 strokes every year.
- *Heart Failure:* Without treatment, AFib can also cause a fast pulse rate for long periods of time. This means that the ventricles (the lower chambers of the heart) are beating too fast. This can weaken the heart muscle over time, and lead to heart failure. Heart failure is a condition in which the heart is not able to pump enough blood to other parts of the body.

What is the treatment for Afib?

If you have atrial fibrillation, you may need to take one or more medicines for the rest of your life, such as:

- Rhythm control medicine (anti-arrhythmic drugs) - medicine that helps keep a normal heart rhythm
- Rate control medicine - medicine that slows down a fast heart rate and prevents weakening of the heart muscle
- Blood thinners (anti-coagulants) - medicine that helps prevent blood clots in the atria and reduce the risk of stroke

Even though you are taking medicine, you may still go into AFib from time to time. Your doctor may offer cardioversion as a treatment option. Cardioversion is a procedure in which an electrical current or “shock” is given to the heart muscle to restore the normal rhythm. It sounds scary, but it is a simple, same-day procedure. You will be given a small amount of sedation through an intravenous (IV) line. Large pads (electrodes) will be placed on your chest. The electrical current will pass through these electrodes to return your heart rhythm to normal.

What can I do to monitor and prevent problems related to my Afib?

- Take your pulse every day. Call your doctor or go to the Emergency Room immediately if your pulse is over 100 beats per minute.
- Take your medicine as told to by your doctor.
- Keep track of any sudden weight gain or swollen ankles because these may be signs of heart failure. Call your doctor immediately if you gain 3-4 pounds in 2 days, your ankles swell or you have any other sign or symptom of retaining (holding) fluids.