



*PATIENT & FAMILY EDUCATION / NYU Medical Center*

## **Atrial Fibrillation**

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# **ATRIAL FIBRILLATION**

## **A Patient's Guide**

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## **What is atrial fibrillation?**

Atrial fibrillation (abbreviated *AF* or *Afib*) is an irregular, rapid contraction of the atria. The human heart is divided into four chambers. There are two upper chambers called atria. There are two lower chambers called ventricles. The septum separates the heart into a left and a right side.

The right atrium receives blood low in oxygen from the body's veins. It then sends the blood to the right ventricle where the blood travels through the pulmonary artery to the lungs. There the blood is enriched with oxygen. The oxygen-rich blood travels to the left atrium, then to the left ventricle which pumps it to the body via the aorta.

In atrial fibrillation, the atria beat out of rhythm with the rest of the heart. The atria may beat as many as 350 to 400 times a minute compared with the normal 60 to 100 times a minute. These rapid, irregular contractions make it difficult for the left atrium to empty the blood into the left ventricle.

## **Who gets atrial fibrillation?**

Atrial fibrillation is a fairly common heart disorder. It affects more than 2 million Americans. As many as 9% of Americans over the age of 65 have afib.

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## **What causes atrial fibrillation?**

Atrial fibrillation can occur in otherwise healthy individuals, but in some cases is associated with an underlying problem, such as:

- Thyroid disease
- Heart attack
- Acute respiratory illness or obstructive lung disease
- Valvular heart disease
- High blood pressure
- Alcohol withdrawal
- After open heart surgery

## **What are the symptoms of atrial fibrillation?**

Not everyone with atrial fibrillation experiences the same symptoms, and some people may have no symptoms. Most common symptoms may include:

- Heart palpitations: a sudden pounding, fluttering, or racing sensation in your chest, which may feel like “butterflies”
- Dizziness: feeling light-headed, like you are going to faint
- Chest pain: may be felt as a sense of discomfort, pressure, or pain in the chest
- Fatigue: you may feel tired, and not have the energy to do things that you did previously

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## **What are the risks of atrial fibrillation?**

Even if your atrial fibrillation is barely noticeable, you must be aware of the possible dangers. If left untreated, afib can lead to serious consequences:

### ***Stroke***

Atrial fibrillation may increase your risk of stroke more than five times. As a result of afib, approximately 80,000 strokes occur every year. Because the rapidly contracting atrium cannot empty properly, blood pools in the atrium and may form into clots. If these clots break free they can lodge in an artery of the brain and cut off the blood supply to that area. This condition, known as stroke, can result in brain damage or death.

### ***Heart failure***

Atrial fibrillation may be associated with heart failure, a condition in which the heart is not able to pump enough blood to support the tissues of the body.

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## How is atrial fibrillation treated?

Your health care provider may use electrical stimulation (*cardioversion*) or medications to restore and maintain a normal heart rhythm or slow the heart rate. In addition, medications known as anticoagulants (*anti = against; coagulant = clotting*) may be used to help prevent harmful blood clots from forming in the left atrium during atrial fibrillation. These drugs may help reduce the risk of stroke that is often associated with afib.

### Patient Responsibilities:

- Learn to take your own pulse so you can monitor the effects of treatment.
- Follow your medication schedule.
- Keep track of any rapid weight gain (such as 3 to 4 pounds in two days) or other signs of fluid retention such as swollen ankles. If these problems occur, report them to your health care provider. They may be signs of heart failure.
- Be sure you understand all the risk and responsibilities involved before you begin any treatment. If you have questions, be sure to ask your health care provider.

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**Call your health care provider if:**

- you experience episodes of palpitations, pounding, fluttering or a racing sensation in your chest
- you develop shortness of breath, difficulty breathing, or chest pain
- you develop swelling in your ankles
- you faint or experience frequent episodes of lightheadedness

***If your symptoms are severe, go to the nearest Emergency Room!***

## **Resources**

- ***National Stroke Association***

1-800-STROKES (1-800-787-6537) or [www.stroke.org](http://www.stroke.org)

- ***American Heart Association Stroke Connection “warmline”***

1-800-553-6321 or [www.americanheart.org](http://www.americanheart.org)

- <http://www.coumadin.com/>

Provides consumers with information on oral anticoagulants

- <http://www.warfarinfo.com>

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