

Atrial Fibrillation

What is atrial fibrillation?

Normally your heart has a regular beat called normal sinus rhythm.

When you have atrial fibrillation electrical impulses or signals come from many different areas within the atria or upper chambers, especially the pulmonary veins. These signals are disorganized and rapid. This causes your heart to beat fast and unevenly.

Atrial fibrillation is also called AF or A fib.

There are 3 types of atrial fibrillation:

- **Paroxysmal:**
This is an irregular heartbeat for short periods of time.
- **Persistent:**
This is an irregular heartbeat for long periods of time.
- **Permanent:**
This is an irregular heartbeat all of the time.

Ask your doctor what type of atrial fibrillation you have.

What causes atrial fibrillation?

There are many causes of atrial fibrillation. Some causes are:

- high blood pressure
- heart attack
- heart failure
- a valve problem
- heart or lung surgery
- lung disease
- thyroid disease
- other heart problems
- stimulant drugs such as cocaine, caffeine and alcohol

Sometimes there is no known cause. Both men and women can have atrial fibrillation. It can happen to anyone, however it becomes more common as you get older.

How will I feel when I have atrial fibrillation?

You may feel:

- tired
- shaky
- sweaty
- trouble breathing
- chest discomfort
- anxious
- irregular or fast heart beat
- your heart pounding
- dizzy

You may feel nothing at all and feel just fine.

Is atrial fibrillation harmful?

Yes, it can be harmful.

If your atrial fibrillation occurs with a fast heartbeat, it could be a concern because it can cause heart failure. With heart failure, your heart cannot pump blood through your body well. Fluid collects in the lungs and causes trouble breathing, swelling, coughing and extreme tiredness.

Atrial fibrillation often causes blood clots. This can be very harmful. A blood clot can block a blood vessel so blood cannot flow through the body. A clot can cause stabbing leg pain, trouble breathing, stroke or heart attack.

How is atrial fibrillation treated?

Atrial fibrillation may be treated with:

1. Medications

- To slow the heart rate. These medications include:
 - beta blockers such as metoprolol or bisoprolol
 - calcium channel blockers such as diltiazem
- To restore normal rhythm. These medications include:
 - anti-arrhythmics such as amiodarone or sotalol
- To help prevent blood clots from forming in the heart. This is called anticoagulant therapy. One name for this medication is warfarin (Coumadin[®]).

2. Cardioversion

Cardioversion is a procedure in which an electrical shock is applied to the heart through the chest wall. The shock is given at a specific time during the heart's rhythm to return your heart to a normal or sinus rhythm. This is a safe procedure carried out in hospital in a monitored setting with sedation.

3. Atrial fibrillation ablation

Atrial fibrillation ablation or pulmonary vein isolation may be a treatment for certain people.

Lower your risk factors

Other ways to help manage atrial fibrillation are to lower your risk factors. You and your health care provider will talk about how to lower your risk.

Some ways to lower risk are:

- control high blood pressure
- treat other heart or lung problems
- correct any thyroid problems
- limit use of caffeine and alcohol
- stop the use of stimulant drugs such as cocaine

Who do I talk to if I have any questions?

You can talk to your doctor, nurse or pharmacist.

Members of the health care team will teach you more about any medication that you take.

Websites

Heart and Stroke Foundation – www.heartandstroke.ca/AFGuide

Canadian Heart Rhythm Society – www.chrsonline.ca

Heart Rhythm Society – www.HRSONline.org

**Regional Cardiac and Vascular Patient Education Committee
Hamilton Health Sciences and
St. Joseph's Healthcare, Hamilton**