

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT ATRIAL FIBRILLATION

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Atrial fibrillation is an irregular and sometimes very fast heart beat. Atrial fibrillation can come and go or be constant. It is more common in older people than in younger people and in people with heart conditions.



Atrial fibrillation can lead to 3 bad health outcomes:

- Symptoms that can make a person unable to do their usual activities.
- Over the long term, a very fast heart beat can damage heart muscle.
- Atrial fibrillation can cause stroke when blood clots form in the heart and travel to the brain.

How would I know if I have atrial fibrillation?

- Many people with atrial fibrillation have no symptoms and don't know that they have it.
- When people have symptoms, they include palpitations (pounding in the chest), shortness of breath, or tiredness.
- Your doctor may see atrial fibrillation on an electrocardiogram (ECG) if an episode occurs during the test.
- If you have symptoms that could be atrial fibrillation but your ECG is normal, your doctor may send you for a test that records your heartbeat while you go about your usual activities.
- If you have atrial fibrillation, your doctor may do an echocardiogram to look for heart problems. Echocardiograms use sound waves to take pictures of the heart.

What is the treatment?

- Many patients with atrial fibrillation need to be on drugs to prevent stroke. Some people need only aspirin. Others need to take the blood thinner warfarin.
- Treatment also sometimes includes drugs to slow the heart rate down or make it more regular.
- Less often, treatment with catheters, surgery, and pacemakers is needed.
- Atrial fibrillation treatment can have dangerous side effects. It is important to follow instructions and see your doctor regularly.

Web Sites with Good Information

MedlinePlus: www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/tutorials/atrialfibrillation/hm/_no_50_no_0.htm

Heart Rhythm Society:
www.hrspatients.org/patients/heart_disorders/atrial_fibrillation/default.asp

American Heart Association:
circ.ahajournals.org/cgi/content/full/117/20/e340