

Atrial fibrill...*what?*

Understanding and managing atrial-fibrillation

What is it?

Atrial fibrillation is hard to pronounce name for a relatively common heart disorder. It means "irregular, rapid contractions of the atrium. "

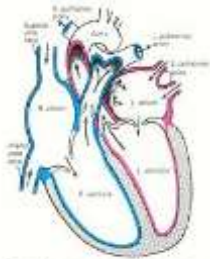


Figure 5.14 Division of the flow of blood through the heart.

The human heart is made up of four chambers that normally work together to pump the blood throughout the body. In A Fib however, the left atrium beats out of rhythm with the rest of the heart. In fact, the left atrium may beat as many as

350 to 400 times a minute during A Fib compared to the 60 to 100 times a minute normally

Who gets AF?

It may surprise you, but AF affects more than 1 million Americans. In fact, as many as 9% of Americans over the age of 65 may have A Fib.

How do you get AF?

AF can occur in otherwise healthy individuals. But, in most cases, AF is associated with either heart disease or thyroid disorders.

When would you suspect you have AF?

Not everyone with AF experiences the same symptoms. In addition, some people may have AF for years without really knowing it. So, it is important to recognize the symptoms of AF so you can discuss them with your doctor.

Symptoms

- **Heart Palpitations** – a sudden fluttering or racing sensation in your heart
- **Dizziness** – feeling lightheaded, like you are going to faint. The best response is to lie down until the feeling passes.
- **Chest pain** – highly variable sensation of discomfort, pressure, or pain in the chest

What are the risks of AF?

Even if your A Fib is barely noticeable, you must be aware of the possible 'dangers. If left untreated, AF can lead to serious consequences.

Stroke

A Fib may increase your risk of stroke more than five times. As a result, approximately 75,000 strokes occur every year because of A Fib. Because the rapidly contracting atrium cannot empty properly, blood pools in the atrium and begins to clot. 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

Long-term A Fib also may weaken the heart muscle. The more frequent the fibrillations, the less effective the heart will be. This can result in heart failure, a condition in which the heart is unable to pump enough blood to support the rest of the tissues of the body.

Both stroke and heart failure are serious, but the good news is that the risk can be lowered with proper care and treatment

The good news is... A Fib can be managed

Hundreds of thousands of people continue to live normal lives with A Fib. You can too. The following is lists of some of the ways your doctor can help you manage your A Fib.

Returning your heart to normal

In many-cases, your doctor will be able to use electrical stimulation or medication to restore your normal heart rhythm.

Preventing stroke

Treatment programs can be used that help prevent dangerous clots that may form in the left atrium during A Fib. As a result, these treatments can help reduce the risk of stroke that is often associated With A Fib.,

Risks and responsibilities

Your doctor may use one or more of these treatments to manage your A Fib. Be sure you understand all the risks and responsibilities involved before you begin Any treatment.