

Atrial Fibrillation

What is atrial fibrillation?

Atrial fibrillation is an abnormal heart beat. The main pumping chambers of the heart beat in a way that is not regular. Sometimes the heartbeat can be very fast. Some people with atrial fibrillation feel completely well. Others feel unwell and may notice:

- A feeling that the heart is racing, pounding, or skipping beats,
- They are short of breath,
- They can no longer do things they like to do (like sports, walking, and gardening),
- They feel dizzy, weak, or have chest pain.

As a rule, this is not a dangerous rhythm, but it can make you feel unwell and can lower your quality of life. Some people with atrial fibrillation are at risk for a clot in the heart which could cause a stroke. If you have atrial fibrillation, this risk should be talked about with your doctor. This risk can be lowered by taking blood thinning medicine. For some patients with very rapid heart rates over a long time, there can be weakening of the heart muscle.

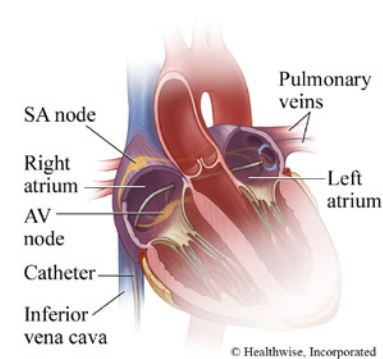


Figure 1. Electrical signals start in the area of pulmonary veins. This signal travels into the left atrium, causing atrial fibrillation.

How is atrial fibrillation diagnosed?

Atrial fibrillation is diagnosed using an electrical tracing of your heartbeat (called an EKG) that takes only a few minutes. It can also be diagnosed with other things that measure the heartbeat such as a heart monitor, on an exercise stress test, or if you already have a pacemaker, or implantable defibrillator.

How can atrial fibrillation be treated?

The heart rate has to be kept under control in atrial fibrillation. Often this is enough to make a person feel OK.

Sometimes this needs medicines like:

- Beta-blockers or calcium channel blockers that will slow the heart rate (these are heart rate control medicines) and
- A mild blood thinner like Aspirin® or a stronger one like warfarin, dabigatran, rivaroxaban, or apixaban to avoid blood clots and lower the chance of stroke.

If you still don't feel well when the heart rate is controlled:

- Special medicines called antiarrhythmics may be right for you. These drugs are not like rate control medicines because they try to keep your heart in a normal rhythm. These medicines can work well, but may have side effects. The type of side effects will depend on which drug is used. Your doctor can tell you more about this.
- Catheter ablation is one more treatment choice that may stop atrial fibrillation from coming back.

What can I do once I have atrial fibrillation?

You should carry on with your usual activities, as long as you feel well. If your doctor feels it is right for you, you may be asked to see to a specialist for more testing, or be sent to the Atrial Fibrillation Clinic at the QEII Health Sciences Centre.

For more information, visit:

www.chrsonline.ca

www.heartandstroke.ca/AFGuide

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**If you have any questions,
please ask.
We are here to help you.**

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