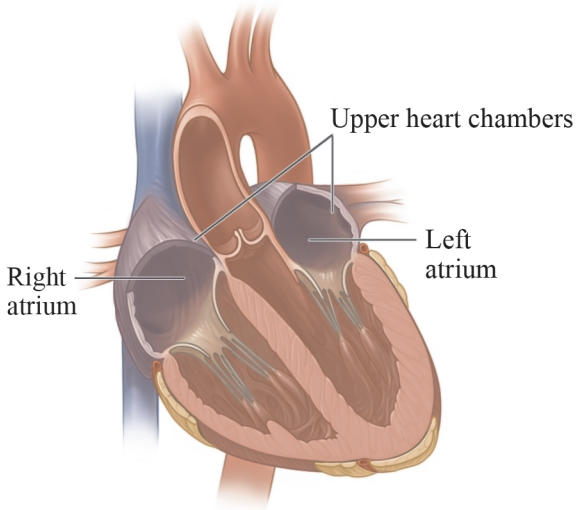
Atrial Fibrillation



Atrial fibrillation is a problem with your heart rhythm. Electrical signals tell your heart muscle to squeeze, or contract. In atrial fibrillation, problems with your heart's electrical signals cause the upper chambers, or left atrium and right atrium, to contract in uncontrolled waves. Your heart also may beat faster than normal. This causes problems with blood flow to your heart and to the rest of your body.

Treating this problem is important because:

- Atrial fibrillation lets blood pool in your heart, which can lead to clots. Clots can move to your brain and cause a stroke. People with atrial fibrillation are much more likely to have a stroke than people who do not have the problem.
- If you have a fast heartbeat, you may feel lightheaded, dizzy, and weak.
- A fast, uncontrolled heartbeat can harm your heart. It increases your risk for chest pain (angina) and heart failure.

You may take medicine to help prevent a stroke. You may need to take medicines to treat the heart problem, or you may need a procedure to help control your heart rate or heart rhythm. You also may need to make lifestyle changes, such as quitting smoking, eating better, and exercising. Improving your heart condition will help you stay healthy and active.

What causes atrial fibrillation?

Atrial fibrillation is common, especially in older adults. It is often caused by another heart problem such as:

- High blood pressure.
- Coronary artery disease (CAD).
- A prior heart attack.
- Heart valve disease.

Atrial fibrillation may also be caused by other problems, such as an overactive thyroid gland or lung disease.

Being obese or having a family history of atrial fibrillation may increase your risk.

Drinking too much alcohol can also lead to atrial fibrillation in people at any age. Binge drinking can cause short-term bouts of the problem. Heavy drinking over many years can cause long-term atrial fibrillation. Heavy drinking is defined as more than 2 drinks a day for men and more than 1 drink a day for women.

Caffeine, nicotine, and other stimulants may also be linked to atrial fibrillation.

Atrial fibrillation has been linked to sleep apnea, a condition in which breathing stops for brief periods during sleep. If you have atrial fibrillation, ask your doctor if you should be checked for sleep apnea, especially if you are overweight. Treating this may reduce your risk of atrial fibrillation.

How will you know if you have atrial fibrillation?

Many people do not have any symptoms. Others do have symptoms. For example:

- You may feel weak or dizzy.
- You may feel short of breath.
- You may have a fluttering or thumping feeling in your chest called palpitations.
- You may have chest pain.

You may notice signs of atrial fibrillation when you check your pulse. Place two fingers on the artery on the inside of your wrist. If your heartbeat seems uneven or fast, talk to your doctor.

How will a doctor diagnose it?

Your doctor will ask questions about your medical history and do tests to see if you have atrial fibrillation or other problems. Tests include:

- An electrocardiogram (EKG, ECG). This test records the electrical activity of your heart. It is the best way to tell if you have atrial fibrillation.
- A physical exam.
- Lab tests.

What can you expect if you have atrial fibrillation?

At first, spells of atrial fibrillation may come on suddenly and last a short time before they go away on their own. This is called paroxysmal atrial fibrillation.

Over time, the spells may last longer and occur more often. With more spells, atrial fibrillation will not go away on its own.

How is it treated?

Many people who have atrial fibrillation are able to live full and active lives. Treatment helps relieve symptoms and prevent problems caused by atrial fibrillation.

You may need to take medicines such as:

- Blood-thinning medicine to prevent blood clots and stroke.
- Medicine to slow your heart rate.
- Medicine to control your heart rhythm.

You may need to have a procedure called cardioversion. Your doctor would use electric shock to return your heart rate to a normal rhythm. Or you may need a different procedure called catheter ablation. This destroys a small area of the heart and stops the electrical impulses that cause the irregular heart rhythm.

Heart surgery is a less common way to try to stop atrial fibrillation.

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