PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Atrial Fibrillation

This information describes the causes, symptoms, and treatment of atrial fibrillation (AY-tree-ul fih-bruh-LAY-shun). Atrial fibrillation is also called atrial fib or AFib.

About Atrial Fib

Atrial fib is when your atria (the upper chambers of your heart) contract very quickly and irregularly. This causes blood to pool in your atria instead of getting pumped into your ventricles (the lower chambers of your heart).

When blood pools in your atria, blood clots are more likely to form. If a piece of a blood clot leaves your heart and travels to your brain, it may get stuck in an artery (blood vessel). This results in a stroke.

Atrial fib is a common heart rhythm disorder.

Causes of Atrial Fib

Your risk of atrial fib increases as you get older. You also have a higher risk of having atrial fib if you have other heart diseases.

The most common causes of atrial fib are:

- Having high blood pressure for a long time
- A heart attack
- Heart failure
- Heart valve disease
- Heart surgery
Chronic lung disease

Less often, atrial fib can be caused by other types of surgery. Atrial fib during surgery is usually temporary.

Atrial fib can also be caused by other things, such as:

- Drinking too much alcohol or binge drinking
- Hyperthyroidism (having an overactive thyroid)
- Medications that increase your heart rate, such as theophylline (an asthma medication that’s in some inhalers) and caffeine
- Sleep apnea
- An infection anywhere in your body
- Chemotherapy

If the cause of atrial fib is unknown, it’s called lone atrial fibrillation.

**Symptoms of Atrial Fib**

Not everyone who has atrial fib knows they have it. Some people have no symptoms, while others have many symptoms that tell them something is wrong.

Mild symptoms include:

- Heart palpitations (an unusually fast, strong, or irregular heartbeat)
- Mild chest discomfort
- Heart racing
- Lightheadedness
- Mild shortness of breath
- Mild fatigue (feeling tired or having little energy)

As the ventricles of your heart beat faster or more irregularly, symptoms may be more severe and include:
- Difficulty breathing
- Shortness of breath
- Fainting or feeling like you’re going to faint
- Confusion
- Chest discomfort
- Fatigue

**Treatment for Atrial Fib**

There are several ways to treat and prevent AFib. These include:

- **Medications to slow down the fast heart rate**, such as:
  - Beta blockers (atenolol, metoprolol, propanolol)
  - Digoxin (Lanoxin®)
  - Amiodarone (Cordarone®)
  - Calcium channel blockers (verapamil, diltiazem)
  - Sotalol (Betapace®)

- **Electrical cardioversion**, which is an electrical shock that’s given to your heart. It can be used to restore your heart’s normal rhythm. It’s used most often when medications don’t improve symptoms.

- **Radiofrequency ablation**, which is a procedure to destroy the tiny areas in your heart that are causing atrial fib. Radiofrequency ablation can be effective when medications and electrical cardioversion don’t work. If you need an ablation, your healthcare provider will tell you more about it. You will need to have this done in another hospital.

- **A pacemaker**, which is a small device placed under your skin near your heart that keeps your heart from beating too slowly. Some medications for atrial fib can make your heart beat too slowly. If you need a pacemaker, your healthcare provider will tell you more about it.
About Medications to Lower Stroke Risk

Medications are used to help lower stroke risk in people with atrial fib. They thin your blood and make it less likely to clot. Examples include:

- Blood thinners, also called anticoagulants, such as warfarin (Coumadin®), enoxaparin (Lovenox®), and rivaroxaban (Xarelto®). They’re the usual treatment for people who are at high risk for stroke.

- Aspirin, which is the usual treatment for people who are at a low risk for stroke.

Your doctor will determine the best treatment for you based on your risk factors for developing a stroke. Risk factors include:

- Having a stroke in the past
- Having congestive heart failure (CHF)
- Older age
- Uncontrolled high blood pressure
- Having blood clots in the past
- Diabetes
- Vascular disease (disease affecting your blood vessels)

Resources

If you’d like to learn more about atrial fib, visit the American Heart Association’s Atrial Fibrillation web page at www.heart.org/afib
If you have any questions, contact a member of your healthcare team directly. If you're a patient at MSK and you need to reach a provider after 5:00 PM, during the weekend, or on a holiday, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.