



NAVIGATE

Steering you to a healthy, vibrant life

SEPTEMBER 2019

What Is Atrial Fibrillation?

Atrial fibrillation is the most common type of irregular heartbeat (arrhythmia).

Normally, the heart beats in a strong, steady rhythm. In atrial fibrillation, a problem with the heart's electrical system causes the two upper parts of the heart, the atria, to quiver, or fibrillate.

The quivering upsets the normal rhythm between the atria and the lower parts of the heart, the ventricles. And the ventricles may beat fast and without a regular rhythm.

This is dangerous because if the heartbeat isn't strong and steady, blood can collect, or pool, in the atria. And pooled blood is more likely to form clots. Clots can travel to the brain, block blood flow, and cause a stroke.

Atrial fibrillation can also lead to heart failure.

What Causes Atrial Fibrillation?

Conditions that damage or strain the heart commonly cause atrial fibrillation. **These include:**

- High blood pressure.
- Coronary artery disease.
- Heart attack.
- Heart valve disease.

Other possible causes include:

- Other medical problems, such as heart failure, lung disease, pneumonia, or a high thyroid level.
- Heart surgery.
- Heavy alcohol use. This includes having more than 3 drinks a day over many years as well as drinking a large amount of alcohol at one time (binge drinking).

What Are the Symptoms?

Sometimes atrial fibrillation doesn't cause obvious symptoms.

If you have symptoms, see your doctor. Finding and treating atrial fibrillation right away can help you avoid serious problems.

Symptoms may include:

- Feeling dizzy or lightheaded
- Feeling out of breath
- Feeling weak and tired
- Feeling like the heart is fluttering, racing, or pounding (palpitations)
- Feeling like the heart is beating unevenly
- Having chest pain
- Fainting

How Is Atrial Fibrillation Diagnosed?

The best way to find out if you have atrial fibrillation is to have an electrocardiogram (EKG or ECG). An EKG is a test that checks for problems with the heart's electrical activity.

You might also have lab tests and an echocardiogram. An echocardiogram can show how well your heart is pumping and whether your heart valves are damaged.

How Is It treated?

Your treatment will depend on the cause of your atrial fibrillation, your symptoms, and your risk for stroke.

Medicines are an important part of treatment.

They may include:

- **Blood-thinning medicine** to help prevent strokes.
- **Rate-control medicines** to keep your heart from beating too fast during atrial fibrillation.
- **Rhythm-control medicines** to help bring your heart rhythm back to normal.

Doctors sometimes use a procedure called cardioversion to try to get the heartbeat back to normal. This can be done using either medicine or a low-voltage electrical shock (electrical cardioversion).

If you have symptoms that are hard to live with, ablation may help. It destroys small areas of the heart to create scar tissue. The scar tissue blocks or destroys the areas that are causing the abnormal heart rhythm.

What Can You Do at Home for Atrial Fibrillation?

Atrial fibrillation is often the result of heart disease or damage. So making changes that improve the condition of your heart may also improve your overall health.



Don't smoke. Avoid secondhand smoke too.



Get regular exercise on most, preferably all, days of the week. Your doctor can suggest a safe level of exercise for you.



Avoid alcohol if it triggers symptoms.



Manage other health problems such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and diabetes.



Stay at a healthy weight. Lose weight if you need to.



Manage your stress. Stress can damage your heart.



Eat a heart-healthy diet with plenty of fish, fruits, vegetables, beans, high-fiber grains and breads, and olive oil.



Avoid getting sick from the flu. Get a flu shot every year.

For more information visit www.healthwise.net/magellanhealth and search for "Atrial Fibrillation."



©1995-2019 Healthwise, Incorporated. www.healthwise.org. Healthwise, Incorporated disclaims any warranty and all liability for your use of this information.

We care about your health and well-being and our staff of registered nurse care managers, mental health professionals, and clinical pharmacists are here to help. If you have questions, please call 855-586-2568, Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. MT.