

Atrial Fibrillation: Prepare for Your Next Visit

What is Atrial Fibrillation (AFib)?

AFib is an irregular, abnormal rhythm of the heart. A normal heart rhythm is called “normal sinus rhythm” and has its own built-in pacemaker called a sinus node. The sinus node is in the top chambers of the heart, or the atrium. AFib is caused by irregular or rapid electrical signals from other parts of the atrium that “take over” the sinus node. The heart rate during AFib is often faster than a regular heart rate.

The disorganized, electrical signals during AFib do not allow the atrium to contract and squeeze blood down into the ventricles, the bottom chambers of the heart. When the atria do not contract, there ends up being reduced blood.

AFib Related Stroke

AFib can increase the risk of having a stroke. Blood can pool and form a clot in the atrium because it is not contracting. A stroke can occur if a blood clot (embolus) breaks off. The clot enters the blood and blocks a small blood vessel. A dangerous place for this to occur is the brain, resulting in a stroke, but the blood clot may also travel to the eyes, kidneys, spine, or other arteries in the arms or legs.



Stroke is a medical emergency.

B E F A S T

Call 911 immediately if you or someone you know develop any signs or symptoms of stroke.

Every minute counts. Learn the physical symptoms to swiftly identify stroke and save your life or the lives of loved ones.



BALANCE

Sudden loss of balance.



EYES

Sudden loss of vision in one or both eyes.



FACE

Does the face look uneven?



ARMS

Does one arm drift down? Ask them to raise both arms.



SPEECH

Does their speech sound strange? Ask them to repeat a phrase.



TIME

Note the time the symptoms began as it can impact treatment decisions and outcomes.

Check off your symptoms:

When some people are in AFib they experience significant symptoms. Each person's AFib experience is unique. Some people experience significant symptoms when they are in AFib. What symptoms do you have?

1. Irregular and Rapid AFib heart rates may result in:

- Palpitations, or heart skipping a beat
- Feeling irregular or abnormal heart beat
- Heart racing
- Difficulty sleeping
- Feeling of uneasiness

2. Decreased blood flow can result in these AFib symptoms:

- Dizziness
- Lightheadedness
- Fainting
- Fatigue that limits ability to exercise
- Mild chest discomfort, chest tightness or pain
- Mild shortness of breath that limits ability to exercise

****Seek emergency support/call 911 if you are experiencing rapid heart rate associated with chest pain, dizziness or fainting, and significant shortness of breath.**

Symptom Frequency Tracker:

If you have symptoms, the next step is to track their frequency. Scan the **QR Code** to download a symptom frequency tracker.



Atrial Fibrillation: Prepare for Your Next Visit



Treatment:

There are a number of treatment options for AFib. You and your healthcare provider will decide on the best treatment plan for you, based on many factors. These factors include how severe your symptoms are, the frequency of AFib you have, why you have AFib, your personal goals, and your overall health.

These treatments may be used alone, or in combination. These strategies include the “4 - Rs”:

Rate Control

Rate control medications do not stop you from having AFib, but control how your heart responds to the AFib. Medications are commonly used to slow the *heart rate*, allowing the heart to pump more normally.

Rhythm Control

Rhythm control can be accomplished through “anti-arrhythmic” medications or through surgical procedures. The medications work to change your heart back to a normal regular heart rhythm and stop the AFib. These medications may have a number of side effects, and may not be an option for all patients.

Procedure options include electrical cardioversion, catheter ablation and pacemaker placement. For more information on these procedures, visit PCNA’s website listed at the bottom of this page.

Reduced Stroke Risk

In AFib, clots that develop in the atrium may cause a stroke. Your healthcare provider may recommend taking a blood-thinning medication (anti-coagulant) to reduce your risk. When taken as prescribed, anticoagulants are very effective in lowering the risk of having a stroke. However, these medications may also cause bleeding because the medication slows normal clotting process. It is important for patients on anticoagulant blood-thinners to work closely with their healthcare team to ensure these medications are taken safely.

Risk Factor Modification

Your healthcare team will work with you to reduce your cardiovascular risk factors as they may worsen your AFib. This includes maintaining goals for your blood pressure, blood sugar and cholesterol levels.

You will be encouraged to achieve a healthy weight with a balanced diet and regular exercise, and stay free of tobacco, smoking and vaping. Limit alcohol intake and report any sleeping difficulties to your health care professional.

Prepare for Your Upcoming Visit:

It is important to get ready for the visit with your health care provider. You will want to include:

1. Symptom Checklist: Use [Frequency Tracker](#)
2. Question List: Write down questions as you think of them before the visit, so you have a complete list of questions ready for the visit.
3. Personal Treatment Goals & Preferences: Be ready to communicate to your health team what things are important to you when treatments are being considered.

- My personal goals for my next visit include:

Want to Learn More?



Check out the PCNA site for these following resources

(resources are available at no charge but may require you to register for a free account to download.)

- Learn more about Atrial Fibrillation at: **What is Atrial Fibrillation and What Can you Do About It?**
- Learn more about Smart Devices, like smartphones and watches, to help monitor your atrial fibrillation treatment at: **Be Smart With Your Heart: Smart Devices on Atrial Fibrillation**
- Learn about tips to living a full life with AFib in the booklet: **The Beat Goes On – Living with AFib.**

Visit Partner Sites:

- **Anticoagulation Forum:**
<https://acforum.org/web/>
- **American Association of Heart Failure Nurses:**
<https://www.aahfn.org/>
- **National Blood Clot Alliance:**
<https://www.stopthecлот.org>

