

Atrial Fibrillation (AF)

Patient information: Cardiology Diagnostic and Interventional Services

What is atrial fibrillation?

Atrial fibrillation is a disorder in your heart rhythm. Instead of a normal steady heart rhythm there is a fast and irregular beating of the top chamber of the heart and irregular beating of the main pumping chambers.

This rhythm may be present all the time or come and go, known as Paroxysmal Atrial Fibrillation.

What are the symptoms?

You may feel your heart racing or extra beats particularly when you are exercising, or in times of emotional stress. You may also notice shortness of breath, slight dizziness or a decrease in your ability to perform daily activities.

Some people with atrial fibrillation do not have symptoms.

What causes atrial fibrillation?

Atrial fibrillation can occur in an otherwise normal heart. It is more common in older people. However, it may be due to damaged heart muscle, a damaged heart valve, an over-active thyroid gland, or excessive alcohol consumption. Your doctor will determine if any of these causes are present.

Can atrial fibrillation cause problems?

People with atrial fibrillation have an increased risk of having a stroke. This is because blood clots can form in the top chamber of the heart which can break off and travel to the brain. This can cut the blood supply to part of the brain causing a stroke.

Your risk of having a stroke with atrial fibrillation will also depend on other factors such as your age and whether you are male or female. Having other medical problems can increase your risk. These include diabetes, hypertension, heart failure, and angina.

The risk is also higher if you have had a stroke or heart attack

How is atrial fibrillation treated?

- 1) **Medicines to slow the speed of your heart.**
A key goal is to control and slow the speed of the heart-beat. A number of medications are helpful including beta-blockers (such as Metoprolol), calcium channel blockers (such as Diltiazem), and Digoxin.
- 2) **Reducing the risk of stroke.**
Blood-thinning medicines (anticoagulants) can reduce your chance of having a stroke.

There are two main types: Warfarin, and Novel Oral Anticoagulants (such as Dabigatran, Rivaroxiban, and Apixaban).

These medicines can have serious side-effects, so the balance of benefits and risks needs to be considered for each person.

Details of these treatments are on the Blood-thinning Medicines for Atrial Fibrillation information sheet.

3) **Attempting to restore normal heart beat.**

The goal of this treatment is to try and get your heart back into a regular rhythm.

Medicines for this are called anti-arrhythmics and include Sotalol, Flecainide, and Amiodarone.

A procedure known as Electrical Cardioversion is used for some people. It is not likely to be helpful if you have been in atrial fibrillation for a long time or have damaged heart muscle or valves.

Details for this procedure are on the Cardioversion information sheet.

For further information on atrial fibrillation:

www.healthinfo.org.nz

For more information about:

- your health and medication, go to www.healthinfo.org.nz
- hospital and specialist services, go to www.cdhb.health.nz