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Wolters Kluwer

Patient education: Atrial fibrillation (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

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What is atrial fibrillation?

Atrial fibrillation is the most common heart rhythm problem ([figure 1](#)). The condition can put you at risk of stroke and other problems, as well as death. Atrial fibrillation is sometimes called "A-fib."

The top 2 chambers of your heart are called the "atria." They pump blood into the larger bottom chambers, which pump blood to your lungs and the rest of your body. In A-fib, your heart beats abnormally and the top chambers stop pumping blood as strongly as normal.

In some people, A-fib never goes away. In others, A-fib can come and go, even with treatment. If you had A-fib in the past, but have a normal heart rhythm now, ask your doctor what you can do to keep A-fib from coming back.

You might be able to lower your chances of having A-fib again if you:

- Control your blood pressure
- Avoid or limit alcohol
- Cut down on caffeine
- Get treatment for an overactive thyroid gland
- Get regular exercise
- Lose weight (if you are overweight)
- Reduce stress

What are the symptoms of A-fib?

Some people with A-fib have no symptoms. When symptoms do happen, they can include:

- Feeling as though your heart is racing, skipping beats, or beating out of sync
 - Mild chest "tightness" or pain
 - Feeling lightheaded, dizzy, or like you might pass out
 - Having trouble breathing, especially with exercise
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Is there a test for A-fib?

Yes. If your doctor or nurse thinks that you might have A-fib, they will probably do a test called an electrocardiogram ("ECG"). It records the electrical activity in your heart.

How is A-fib treated?

In some cases, A-fib goes away on its own, even without treatment. But many people do need treatment.

Treatment can include 1 or more of the following:

- Medicines to control the speed or rhythm of the heartbeat
 - Medicines to keep clots from forming
 - "Cardioversion" – This involves applying an electrical current to the heart to fix its rhythm.
 - "Ablation" – These treatments involve destroying the small part of the heart that is sending abnormal electrical signals. This can be done using heat ("radiofrequency ablation") or cold ("cryoablation").
 - Pacemaker – This is a device that is implanted in the body and sends electrical signals to the heart to control the heartbeat.
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What will my life be like?

Most people with A-fib are able to live normal lives. Still, it is important to take the medicines that your doctor prescribes every day. Taking your medicines as directed can help reduce the chances that your A-fib will cause a stroke. It's also a good idea to learn what the signs and symptoms of a stroke are ([figure 2](#)).

When should I call the doctor?

Call for an ambulance (in the US and Canada, **call 9-1-1**) if:

- You have severe trouble breathing, or you pass out.
- You have signs of a heart attack, which might include:
 - Severe chest pain, pressure, or discomfort with:
 - Breathing trouble, sweating, upset stomach, or cold and clammy skin
 - Pain in your arms, back, or jaw
 - Pain that gets worse with activity like walking up stairs
- You have signs of a stroke, which might include:
 - Numbness or weakness of the face, arm, or leg, especially on 1 side of the body
 - Confusion, or trouble speaking or understanding
 - Trouble seeing in 1 or both eyes
 - Trouble walking, dizziness, or loss of balance or coordination
 - Severe headache with no known cause

Call your doctor for advice if:

- You have trouble breathing when talking or sitting still.
- You feel your heart racing, and it does not stop after a while (for example, 1 hour).
- You are lightheaded or more tired than normal.

More on this topic

[Patient education: Medicines for atrial fibrillation \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Heart failure and atrial fibrillation \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Atrial flutter \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: ECG and stress test \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Choosing an oral medicine for blood clots \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Taking oral medicines for blood clots \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Catheter ablation for the heart \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Stroke \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Ambulatory heart monitoring \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Cardioversion \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Atrial fibrillation – Discharge instructions \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Atrial fibrillation \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Catheter ablation for abnormal heartbeats \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Cardioversion \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

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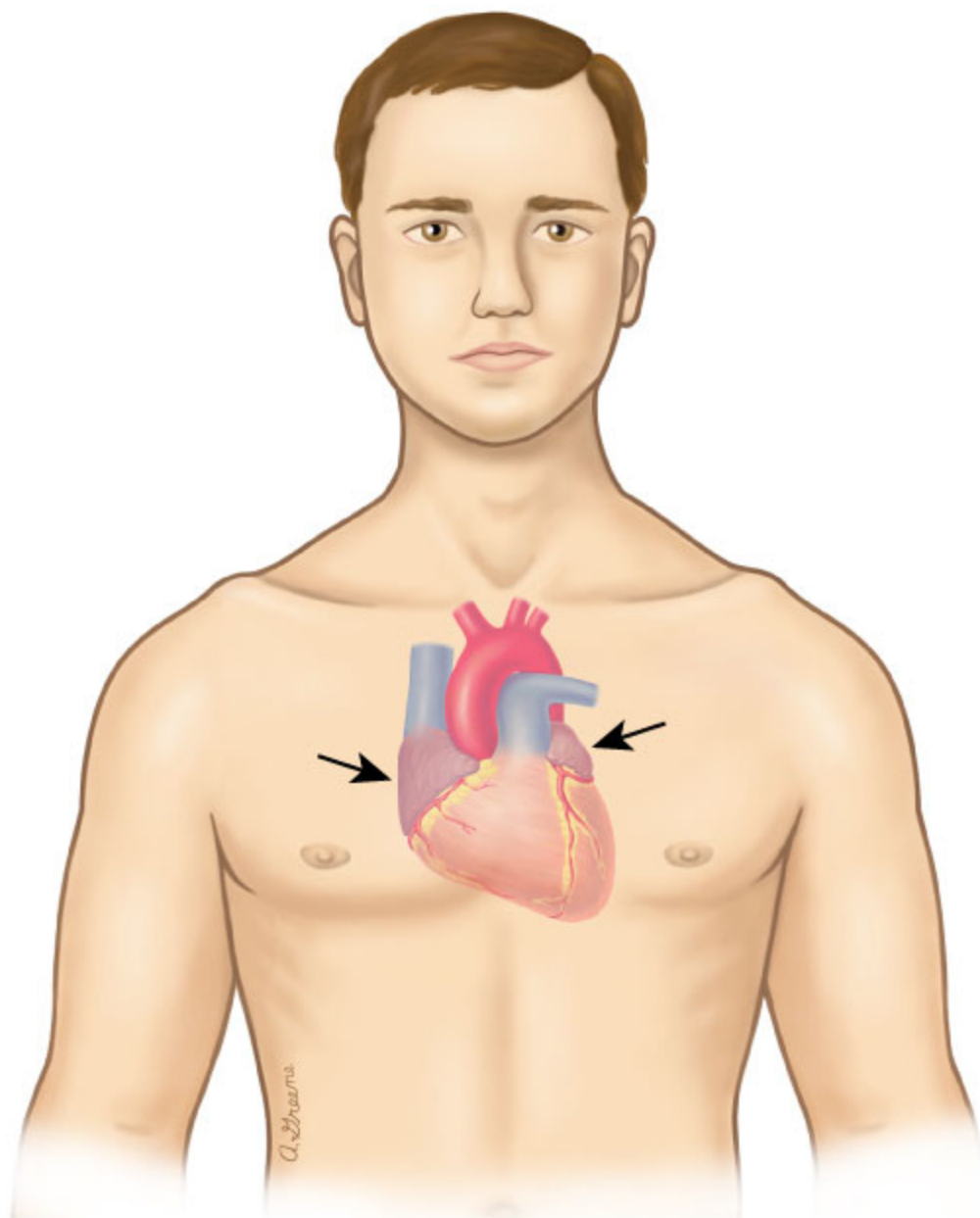
This topic retrieved from UpToDate on: Jan 30, 2024.

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Topic 15327 Version 24.0

GRAPHICS

Atrial fibrillation



This drawing shows where the heart is located in the chest. In atrial fibrillation ("A-fib"), the electrical signals that control the heartbeat are abnormal. As a result, the top 2 chambers of the heart (see arrows) stop pumping effectively, and blood that should move out of these chambers gets left behind.

Graphic 76873 Version 6.0

BE FAST to help remember stroke symptoms

B**B**alance is off**E****E**yes have trouble seeing**F****F**ace is uneven**A****A**rm is weak**S****S**peech is strange**T****T**ime to call an ambulanceIn the US and Canada,
call 9-1-1

One way to help remember stroke symptoms is to think of the words "BE FAST." If a person shows any of these signs, **call for an ambulance right away** (in the US and Canada, **call 9-1-1**).

Graphic 73487 Version 9.0

