

Patient information factsheet

Atrial fibrillation

Atrial fibrillation is a heart condition that causes an irregular and often abnormally fast heart rate.

A normal heart rate should be regular and between 60 and 100 beats a minute when you're resting. You can measure your heart rate by feeling the pulse in your neck or wrist.

In atrial fibrillation, the heart rate is irregular and can sometimes be very fast. In some cases, it can be considerably higher than 100 beats a minute. This can cause problems including dizziness, shortness of breath and tiredness. You may be aware of noticeable heart palpitations, where your heart feels like it's pounding, fluttering or beating irregularly, often for a few seconds or, in some cases, a few minutes.

Sometimes, atrial fibrillation doesn't cause any symptoms and a person with it is completely unaware that their heart rate isn't regular. When the heart beats normally, its muscular walls contract (tighten and squeeze) to force blood out and around the body. They then relax, so the heart can fill with blood again. This process is repeated every time the heart beats.

In atrial fibrillation, the heart's upper chambers (atria) contract randomly and sometimes so fast that the heart muscle can't relax properly between contractions. This reduces the heart's efficiency and performance.

Symptoms

The most obvious symptom of atrial fibrillation is heart palpitations – where your heart may feel like it's pounding, fluttering or beating irregularly, often for a few seconds or possibly a few minutes. As well as an irregular heartbeat, your heart may also beat very fast (often considerably higher than 100 beats per minute).

Other symptoms you may experience if you have atrial fibrillation include:

- tiredness, and being less able to exercise
- breathlessness
- feeling faint or lightheaded
- chest pain

The way the heart beats in atrial fibrillation reduces the heart's performance and efficiency. This can lead to low blood pressure (hypotension) and heart failure.

Causes

Atrial fibrillation occurs when abnormal electrical impulses suddenly start firing in the atria. These impulses override the heart's natural pacemaker, which can no longer control the rhythm of the heart. This causes you to have a highly irregular pulse rate.

The cause isn't fully understood, but it tends to occur in certain groups of people (see below) and may be triggered by certain situations, such as drinking excessive amounts of alcohol or smoking.

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Atrial fibrillation is common in people with other heart conditions, such as:

- high blood pressure (hypertension)
- atherosclerosis (condition where arteries become clogged up by fatty substances known as plaques or atheroma)
- heart valve disease
- congenital heart disease (this is a general term for a range of birth defects that affect the normal workings of the heart)
- cardiomyopathy (this is a general term for diseases of the heart muscle)
- pericarditis (swelling of the pericardium, which is the fluid-filled sac surrounding your heart)

It's also associated with other medical conditions, including:

- an overactive thyroid gland
- pneumonia
- asthma
- chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)
- lung cancer
- diabetes
- pulmonary embolism
- carbon monoxide poisoning

Treatment

Treatments for atrial fibrillation include medications to control heart rate and reduce the risk of stroke, and procedures such as cardioversion to restore normal heart rhythm.

You'll have a treatment plan and work closely with your healthcare team to decide the most suitable and appropriate treatment for you. Factors that will be taken into consideration include:

- your age
- you overall health
- the type of atrial fibrillation you have
- your symptoms
- whether you have an underlying cause that needs to be treated

Medicines to control atrial fibrillation

Medicines called anti-arrhythmics can control atrial fibrillation by:

- restoring a normal heart rhythm
- controlling the rate at which the heart beats

The choice of anti-arrhythmic medicine depends on the type of atrial fibrillation, any other medical conditions you have, side effects of the medicine chosen and how well the atrial fibrillation responds. Some people with atrial fibrillation may need more than one anti-arrhythmic medicine to control it.

Who to contact if you are concerned

If you have any concerns about your symptoms you should contact your GP or call 111 for advice.

Useful links

NHS Choices www.nhs.uk/conditions/atrial-fibrillation/Pages/Introduction.aspx

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Have your say

We would be very grateful if you would complete a feedback card before you leave. It's your chance to have your say on the treatment you have received in hospital. Feedback helps us continually improve the service we give to our patients.

University Hospital Southampton NHS Foundation Trust
Southampton General Hospital
Tremona Road
Southampton
SO16 6YD
Main switchboard: **023 8077 7222**

The information in this factsheet has been adapted from NHS Choices www.nhs.uk

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