



Atrial Fibrillation

Your quick guide



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For over 50 years we've pioneered research that's transformed the lives of people living with heart and circulatory conditions. Our work has been central to the discoveries of vital treatments that are changing the fight against heart disease.

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Join our fight for every heartbeat in the UK. Every pound raised, minute of your time and donation to our shops will help make a difference to people's lives.

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What is atrial fibrillation?

Atrial fibrillation or AF is a common abnormal heart rhythm. Normally, the natural pacemaker in your heart sends out a regular electrical impulse that travels through your heart and makes it beat in time. But if you have AF, extra impulses fire off randomly from different points causing the top of your heart to twitch (or fibrillate). The result is often an irregular and sometimes very fast pulse.

AF affects about a million people in the UK

Many people have AF and don't know they do.



Why is AF such a problem?

AF increases your risk of a blood clot developing in your heart which can travel to your brain and cause a stroke.

AF can increase your risk of stroke by five times.

It can also affect how well your heart pumps which can increase your risk of heart failure in the future. The good news is that, with treatment, these risks can be dramatically reduced.



Why do people get AF?

The chances of having AF increase as you get older.

About 7 in every 100 people over 65 have AF.

Having other conditions makes AF more likely. They include:

- Other diseases of the heart such as coronary heart disease and heart failure
- High blood pressure
- An overactive thyroid
- Lung cancers and chest infections like pneumonia
- Alcohol or drug misuse



What are the signs and symptoms?

Palpitations (being aware of your heartbeat) are a common symptom of AF. People with palpitations often say it feels as if their heart is jumping all over the place.

Your heart rhythm

In atrial fibrillation the top chambers of your heart quiver, which means the heart rhythm is often irregular and usually faster than normal, although it can also be slower than normal too.

Your heart rhythm



It's also common to feel a little breathless and tired with AF, although some people don't have any symptoms at all. An irregular pulse is a sign that you might have AF, so it's important to know how to check yours (see the back of this leaflet).

If your pulse doesn't follow a steady pattern, tell your GP.

A cardiac event recorder can also help pick up this kind of AF but you keep this machine with you so that you can record your heart rate and rhythm when you feel symptoms.

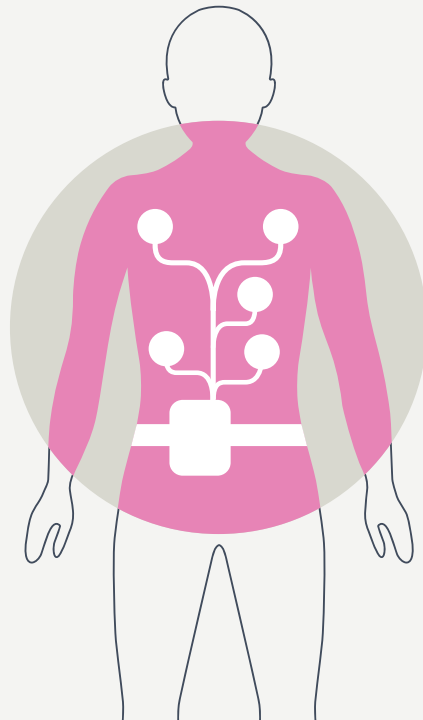
Preventing AF from developing in the first place is very important. You can help prevent AF if you keep your blood pressure and weight under control with a healthy lifestyle.



How is it diagnosed?

Holter monitor

An ECG (electrocardiogram) is a test often used to diagnose AF. But if the AF comes and goes it can be difficult to detect with an ECG and you may need to wear a holter monitor. That's a small machine which you can wear for several days to continuously record your heart rhythm.



Can I take any medicines for AF?

Medicines are usually given to help control your heart rate and rhythm. They help to improve the symptoms of AF and reduce the risk of damage to your heart.

People with AF are usually also prescribed a blood thinning medicine – such as warfarin – to reduce your risk of stroke.



Michelle's story

Michelle was told she had atrial fibrillation in 2002.

"I had been feeling short of breath, dizzy and had even fainted. It was explained to me in full why this was happening.

I can very much feel when I'm in AF. It's like a sudden thud, almost a bolt of lightning, then the horrid feeling of your heart trying to come out of your chest.

I have been taking warfarin for over nine years to reduce my risk of stroke. I have been prescribed several other medicines over the years to try and keep things under control, but when I am in AF my heart rate can go both very fast and very slow."



“I was very scared when I was told I had slow AF and would need a pacemaker. **However my consultant explained it all to me, talking me from tears to smiles.**”

Michelle, supporter



Are there any other treatments for AF?

A treatment called cardioversion involves giving you a controlled electrical shock to get your heart back into a normal rhythm. It may only restore a normal rhythm for a short while, and your AF can return.

A treatment called catheter ablation is also sometimes used to try to get your heart rhythm back to normal, especially if you have very fast AF. It involves burning certain areas of tissue in your heart to block the extra electrical impulses entering your heart.



How might it affect my day-to-day life?

People with AF don't always know when the symptoms of AF may come on. That means some people worry about going out or playing sport, but most people find that they can carry on as normal with the help of medicines. If you are taking warfarin, getting your warfarin levels checked regularly can be tiresome, but it is really important to help prevent you from having a stroke.



How to check your pulse

You can check to see if you might have AF by feeling the pulse at your wrist.

Checking your pulse



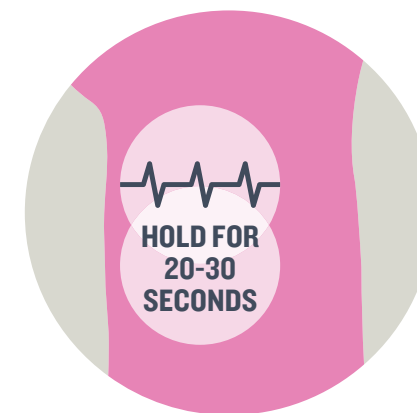
1. Put one of your hands out so you're looking at your palm.



2. Use the index finger and middle finger of your other hand and place the skin of these fingertips on the inside of your wrist. You should place them at the base of your thumb near where the strap of a watch would sit.



3. Press lightly and feel the pulse. If you can't feel anything press slightly harder or move your fingers around until you feel your pulse.



4. Once you've found your pulse, continue to feel it for about 20–30 seconds. Feel the rhythm of the pulse to see if it's regular or irregular.

A normal pulse should follow a steady beat.

If you have AF your pulse will usually feel irregular, unpredictable and possibly fast, and its strength may come and go. If your pulse feels like this, or if you're worried, see your GP.



Use this space to make notes for discussions with your doctor.

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Join us in the fight for every heartbeat.

For 50 years the British Heart Foundation has been funding life-saving heart research. Our work has been central to the discoveries of vital treatments that are changing the fight against heart disease. But we need your support to continue this fight.

Visit bhf.org.uk to make a donation or find out more.

For more information

You can order our booklet Atrial fibrillation. Other booklets and leaflets include:

Stroke

Blood pressure

You can also find out more from the AF Association atrialfibrillation.org.uk

Contact

For more information visit the British Heart Foundation website bhf.org.uk

Heart Helpline 0300 330 3311

(a similar cost to 01 and 02 numbers)

For information and support on anything heart-related.

Booklets and DVDs

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