

ATRIAL FIBRILLATION (AFIB) AND STROKE

WHAT IS AFIB AND HOW IS IT RELATED TO STROKE?

Afib is a type of irregular or "racing" heartbeat that can cause blood to collect in the heart and potentially form a clot, which can travel to a person's brain and cause a stroke or brain attack. This condition increases a person's risk for stroke by 500%. Plus, three out of four Afib-related strokes can be prevented. Afib-related strokes are also more deadly. In fact, more than 70% of Afib patients who have strokes will die as a result. While an estimated 2.2 million people are diagnosed with Afib, it is estimated that one-third of Americans who have it are still undiagnosed. Treatments are available for Afib if it is diagnosed properly.

WHO IS MOST LIKELY TO HAVE AFIB?

While it can occur at any age, Afib is more common as you grow older. About five percent of people 65 years old have Afib. One in every 10 people over the age of 80 has Afib and it's more common in those with high blood pressure, heart disease or lung disease.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

A normal heart beats 60 to 100 times per minute. Patients with Afib can experience heartbeats as fast as 450 times per minute. Often, Afib has no visible symptoms. Some people with Afib describe fluttering, racing or pounding sensations in their chests. Others may only experience dizziness, fainting or lightheadedness during an episode.

HOW CAN I TELL IF I HAVE AFIB?

The National Stroke Association suggests you use the simple "Check Your Pulse" test once a month. The test checks for an irregular pulse – a sign of possible Afib. Ask your doctor to check as well. Remember you are checking for heart RHYTHM, not RATE. In other words you are checking for how your heart is beating and not how many times it beats in a 60-second period.

IRREGULAR PULSE

- Step 1** Turn your left hand so your palm is facing up. Place the first two fingers of your right hand on the outer edge of your left wrist, just below where you wrist and thumb meet.
- Step 2** Slide your fingers toward the center of your wrist until you find your pulse.
- Step 3** Press your fingers down onto your wrist until you feel your pulse, being careful not to press too hard. Move your fingers around until the pulse is easy to feel.
- Step 4** Feel you pulse for 60 seconds. Don't count the beats. Just pay attention to whether the rhythm seems regular or irregular. A regular pulse will feel even and consistent. An irregular pulse will feel erratic and unpredictable.

TREATMENTS FOR AFIB

Most Afib-related strokes could be prevented with anti-coagulation treatments, yet up to two-thirds of Afib patients who had strokes were not prescribed anti-coagulants or blood thinners. Anticoagulation can reduce the risk of first stroke by 60 to 80* percent. There are several reasons why current drugs are not being prescribed including interactions with diet and other drugs, the necessity for frequent blood tests and monitoring and concerns about increased risk of bleeding. But, there are new drugs on the horizon that may have fewer complications and will eliminate the monitoring issues associated with current treatments.

The goal for treating Afib is to restore the normal, regular rhythm of your heart. Often, this can be done with medications or the use of electrical stimulation. If these efforts are not successful, Afib treatment concentrates on protecting you from the blood clots that could travel from the heart to the brain, causing strokes. To reduce the risk of stroke, doctors can prescribe clot-preventing medications, which can greatly reduce stroke risk if taken properly.

OTHER RESOURCES

www.Afibbers.org

An Internet-based gathering place for people with Afib.

www.affacts.org

The Atrial Fibrillation Foundation is dedicated to increasing an understanding of atrial fibrillation.

www.acforum.org

The Anticoagulation Forum is a network of medical professionals who deal with the management of blood clotting disorders.

www.StopAfib.org

StopAfib.org is a patient-to-patient resource to help patients control their atrial fibrillation.

www.strokeheartcoalition.org

The National Coalition for Stroke and Heart Disease Prevention brings together top healthcare professionals and health focused organizations to research useful processes, test their success and educate others on how to use them in practice.

www.TeamAFib.com

Team AFib is a coalition of organizations that advocates for patients with atrial fibrillation and raises awareness about Afib.

All publications are reviewed for scientific and medical accuracy by National Stroke Association's Publications Committee.

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*The percentage was changed in 2013 to match the current brochure, Making the Afib-Stroke Connection. The brochure was vetted through MLR. Changes to this fact sheet also include substituting "AF" with "Afib" to match the 2012-13 style guide and adding two resources, StopAfib.org and TeamAfib.com.