

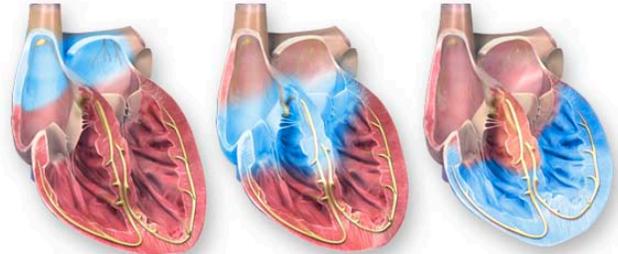


# What Is Atrial Fibrillation?

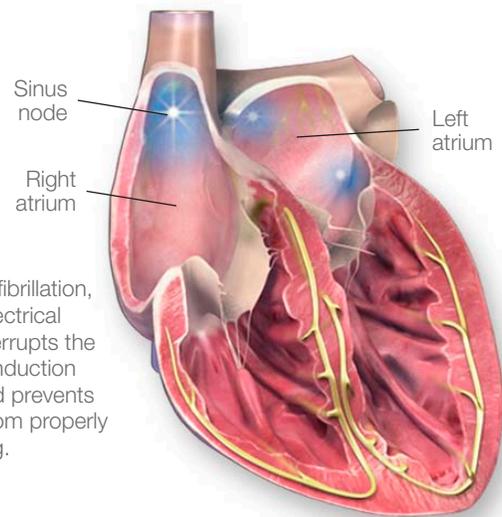
Normally, your heart contracts and relaxes to a regular beat. Certain cells in your heart make electric signals that cause the heart to contract and pump blood. These electrical signals show up on an electrocardiogram (ECG) recording. Your doctor can read your ECG to find out if the electric signals are normal.

In atrial fibrillation (AF or AFib), the heart's two small upper chambers (atria) of the heart don't beat the way they should. Instead of beating in a normal pattern, the atria beat irregularly and too fast, quivering like a bowl of gelatin. It's important for the heart to pump properly so your body gets the oxygen and food it needs. You can live with AFib, but it can lead to other rhythm problems, chronic fatigue, heart failure and — worst of all — stroke. You'll need a doctor to help you control the problem.

Your heart has a natural pacemaker, called the “sinus node,” that makes electrical signals. These signals cause the heart to contract and pump blood.



The illustrations above show normal conduction and contraction.



With atrial fibrillation, random electrical activity interrupts the normal conduction rhythm and prevents the atria from properly contracting.

## How do I know I have atrial fibrillation?

Here are some of the symptoms you may have:

- Irregular and rapid heartbeat
- Heart palpitations or rapid thumping inside the chest
- Dizziness, sweating and chest pain or pressure
- Shortness of breath or anxiety
- Tiring more easily when exercising
- Fainting (syncope)

## What can correct it?

Sometimes AFib can be corrected with an electric shock. This shock may change the beat of your heart back to normal.

- You may take medicines, such as beta blockers or

antiarrhythmics, to help return your heart rate to a normal rhythm.

- You may take medicines, such as digitalis, calcium channel blockers or amiodarone to help slow your heart rate.
- You may need surgery, a pacemaker or other procedures.
- Your treatment will depend on the underlying cause of your AFib and your level of disability.

## How can I lower my risk of stroke?

The risk of stroke is about five times higher in people with AFib. This is because with AFib blood can pool in the atria and form blood clots.

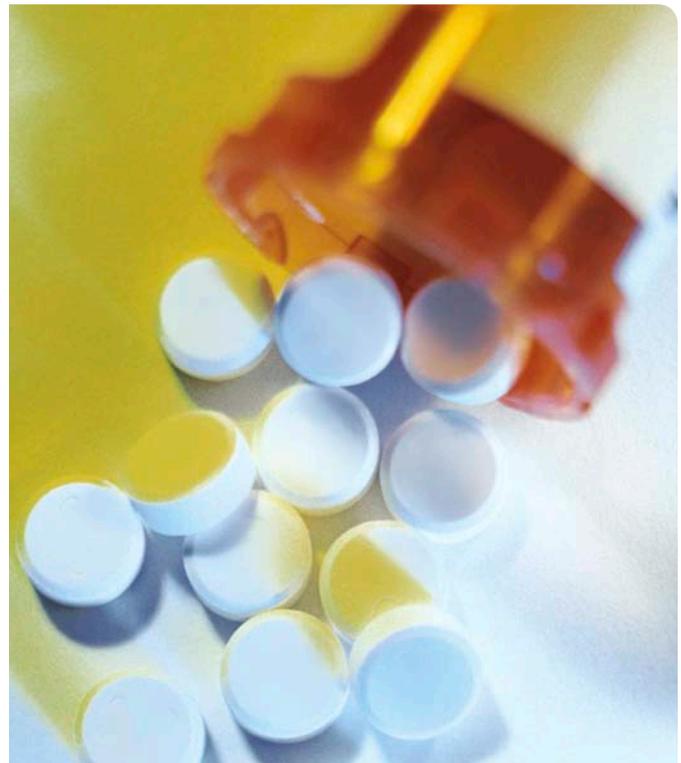
To reduce your stroke risk, your doctor may prescribe

(continued)



you drugs to keep blood clots from forming. Two examples are anticoagulants and antiplatelets such as aspirin and warfarin. More recently a drug called dabigatran has been approved, and may also be prescribed.

- Always tell your doctor, dentist and pharmacist if you take aspirin, warfarin or dabigatran.
- If you have any unusual bleeding or bruising or other problems, tell your doctor right away.



If you have AFib, your doctor may prescribe medications such as aspirin or warfarin to help prevent clots from forming in your arteries.

## HOW CAN I LEARN MORE?

- 1** Talk to your doctor, nurse or other healthcare professionals. If you have heart disease or have had a stroke, members of your family also may be at higher risk. It's very important for them to make changes now to lower their risk.
- 2** Call **1-800-AHA-USA1** (1-800-242-8721), or visit **heart.org** to learn more about heart disease.
- 3** For information on stroke, call **1-888-4-STROKE** (1-888-478-7653) or visit us at **StrokeAssociation.org**.

## Do you have questions for the doctor or nurse?

Take a few minutes to write your questions for the next time you see your healthcare provider.

For example:

**What should my pulse be?**

**How do I take my pulse?**

## My Questions:

We have many other fact sheets to help you make healthier choices to reduce your risk, manage disease or care for a loved one. Visit **heart.org/answersbyheart** to learn more.

**Knowledge is power, so Learn and Live!**

