

Atrial fibrillation

Atrial fibrillation (sometimes called afib or AF) is a type of heart rhythm problem where your heartbeat is not steady. See a GP if you think you may have it.

Symptoms of atrial fibrillation

The main symptoms of atrial fibrillation are:

- an irregular heartbeat, where your pulse is not steady
- suddenly feeling like your heart is pounding, racing, fluttering, skipping or missing a beat (heart palpitations) – this may last for a few seconds up to a few minutes
- a heartbeat faster than 100 beats per minute
- feeling very tired
- finding it harder to exercise
- chest pain or tightness
- feeling short of breath, lightheaded, dizzy or like you might faint

Sometimes there are no symptoms, and atrial fibrillation is found as part of a routine check-up or when you're having tests for something else.

If you do get symptoms, they may start and stop on their own (paroxysmal atrial fibrillation) or stop after treatment (persistent atrial fibrillation).

Over time, you may always have symptoms (permanent atrial fibrillation).

See a GP if:

you think you may have symptoms of atrial fibrillation

you have heart palpitations that keep happening or are getting worse

you have been diagnosed with atrial fibrillation and treatment is not helping your symptoms

Call 999 if:

You currently have a fast or irregular heartbeat, and any of these symptoms:

chest pain

shortness of breath

sweating

feeling or being sick

fainting, feeling dizzy or falling over

a severe headache

weakness or numbness on one side of your face or body

blurred vision or loss of sight

confusion or difficulty speaking

Do not drive yourself to A&E.

The person you speak to at 999 will give you advice about what to do.

Tests for atrial fibrillation

If a GP thinks you could have atrial fibrillation, they will refer you to a heart specialist (cardiologist).

At your appointment, they will ask about your symptoms and check your heart rate.

You will also have tests to see if anything else could be causing your symptoms and to check your heart rhythm. Tests may include:

- an electrocardiogram (ECG)
- an echocardiogram (echo)
- a chest X-ray
- blood tests

Treatment for atrial fibrillation

If you have been diagnosed with atrial fibrillation, you will have regular check-ups to make sure your symptoms are under control.

You may be given medicine to:

- control the rate and rhythm of your heart, such as beta blockers
- lower the risk of blood clots or stroke (anticoagulants)

Other possible treatments for atrial fibrillation include:

- surgery to burn or freeze a section of the heart (ablation)
- using electricity to reset your heart rhythm (electrical cardioversion)
- having a pacemaker or implantable cardioverter defibrillator (ICD) fitted

Sometimes atrial fibrillation can be caused by another health condition or medicine. In these cases, treating the condition or stopping the medicine can improve the symptoms.

Information:

More about treatments

- British Heart Foundation: anti-arrhythmics
- Arrhythmia Alliance: Atrial fibrillation (AF) drug information (PDF only, 1.88MB)

- [NHS medicines A to Z: find your medicine](#)
- [British Heart Foundation: ablation](#)
- [British Heart Foundation: cardioversion](#)

Things you can do yourself to help with atrial fibrillation

In addition to treatment you might need, there are things you can do yourself to help with symptoms of atrial fibrillation and lower the chances of complications.

Do

avoid triggers such as caffeine, spicy food, stress, [dehydration](#) and lack of sleep
 try to keep to a healthy weight
 eat a balanced diet
 exercise regularly – aim to do at least 150 minutes of moderate exercise a week, like walking, bike riding or gardening

Don't

do not smoke

do not drink too much alcohol

do not exercise too much or too hard – this can trigger atrial fibrillation

NHS help to get healthy

NHS Better Health has free tools and support to help you lose weight, get active, quit smoking and drink less.

[Visit the NHS Better Health website](#)

Causes of atrial fibrillation

Atrial fibrillation is caused by a problem with the electrical system that makes your heart beat.

Anyone can get it, but you may be more likely to get it if:

- you're aged 55 or older
- you're a man
- you're living with obesity or overweight
- you smoke
- you take certain medicines, such as [levothyroxine](#), [lithium](#) or some asthma medicines like [salbutamol](#)
- you do endurance sports like long-distance running, cycling or skiing

Atrial fibrillation can also be caused by another condition such as:

- [high blood pressure](#)
- heart conditions like [heart failure](#), [mitral valve problems](#) or [Wolff-Parkinson-White syndrome](#)
- a heart attack
- [chronic kidney disease](#)

- an overactive thyroid (hyperthyroidism)
- diabetes
- sleep apnoea

How atrial fibrillation affects your life

There is currently no cure for atrial fibrillation, but treatment should help manage the symptoms and lower the risk of complications like blood clots, stroke and heart failure.

You should be able to carry on doing most things as usual, including exercise. But avoid intense exercise and try not to exercise when you're having symptoms of atrial fibrillation. Check with your doctor if you're not sure what exercise you can do.

If you drive you may need to tell the DVLA that you have atrial fibrillation. Your doctor will be able to tell you if this applies to you.

There might also be other practical things you need to think about if you have a heart condition, like travelling abroad with medicine, and changes to health or travel insurance.

Help and support for atrial fibrillation

While atrial fibrillation can usually be managed, living with a heart condition can be worrying.

You may find it helpful to get support from other people with atrial fibrillation, either at a local support group or online.

There are also national charities that can offer information, help and support.

British Heart Foundation

Information and support for anyone affected by a heart condition.

- Website: www.bhf.org.uk
- British Heart Foundation: Heart Helpline (call, email or webchat with a cardiac nurse)
- British Heart Foundation: our online community
- British Heart Foundation: support with everyday life

MyHeart

Information and support for young people diagnosed with heart conditions and their families.

Source: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/atrial-fibrillation/>