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Atrial Fibrillation

Also called: AF, AFib

What is atrial fibrillation (AFib)?

Atrial fibrillation, also known as AFib or AF, is one of the most common types of arrhythmias

[\[https://medlineplus.gov/arrhythmia.html\]](https://medlineplus.gov/arrhythmia.html) . Arrhythmias are problems with the rate or rhythm of your heartbeat. They can cause your heart to beat too slowly, too fast, or in an irregular way.

If you have AFib, your heart beats irregularly and sometimes much faster than normal. Also, your heart's upper and lower chambers do not work together as they should. When this happens, the lower chambers do not fill completely or pump enough blood to your lungs and body. This can cause symptoms such as dizziness

[\[https://medlineplus.gov/dizzinessandvertigo.html\]](https://medlineplus.gov/dizzinessandvertigo.html) , fatigue [\[https://medlineplus.gov/fatigue.html\]](https://medlineplus.gov/fatigue.html) , and a pounding heartbeat.

AFib may happen in brief episodes, or it may be a permanent condition. It's very important to treat it, since AFib can put you at risk for stroke [\[https://medlineplus.gov/stroke.html\]](https://medlineplus.gov/stroke.html) and other heart conditions [\[https://medlineplus.gov/heartdiseases.html\]](https://medlineplus.gov/heartdiseases.html)

What causes atrial fibrillation (AFib)?

AFib is most often caused by changes to the heart's tissue or the electrical signaling that helps the heartbeat. These changes can happen due to different conditions and factors, such as high blood pressure

[\[https://medlineplus.gov/highbloodpressure.html\]](https://medlineplus.gov/highbloodpressure.html) , coronary artery disease

[\[https://medlineplus.gov/coronaryarterydisease.html\]](https://medlineplus.gov/coronaryarterydisease.html) , congenital heart defects

[\[https://medlineplus.gov/congenitalheartdefects.html\]](https://medlineplus.gov/congenitalheartdefects.html) , infections, and aging. Sometimes the cause is unknown.

Who is more likely to develop atrial fibrillation (AFib)?

Anyone can develop AFib, but there are certain things that raise your risk for it:

- **Aging.** The risk of atrial fibrillation increases as you get older, especially when you are over age 65.
- **Family history and genetics.** AFib can run in families. So can heart disease, which raises your risk of AFib.
- **Some lifestyle choices.** Your risk is higher if you drink a lot of alcohol, use certain illegal drugs such as cocaine and methamphetamines, or smoke.
- **Having certain health conditions,** such as:
 - High blood pressure
 - Diabetes [\[https://medlineplus.gov/diabetes.html\]](https://medlineplus.gov/diabetes.html)
 - Heart failure [\[https://medlineplus.gov/heartfailure.html\]](https://medlineplus.gov/heartfailure.html)
 - Heart valve diseases [\[https://medlineplus.gov/heartvalvediseases.html\]](https://medlineplus.gov/heartvalvediseases.html)
 - Obesity [\[https://medlineplus.gov/obesity.html\]](https://medlineplus.gov/obesity.html)
 - Hyperthyroidism [\[https://medlineplus.gov/hyperthyroidism.html\]](https://medlineplus.gov/hyperthyroidism.html)
 - Chronic kidney disease [\[https://medlineplus.gov/chronickidneydisease.html\]](https://medlineplus.gov/chronickidneydisease.html)
 - COPD [\[https://medlineplus.gov/copd.html\]](https://medlineplus.gov/copd.html) and other lung diseases [\[https://medlineplus.gov/lungdiseases.html\]](https://medlineplus.gov/lungdiseases.html)
 - Sleep apnea [\[https://medlineplus.gov/sleepapnea.html\]](https://medlineplus.gov/sleepapnea.html)
- **Race.** AFib is more common in people with European ancestry.

- **Recent surgery.** You may be at risk of atrial fibrillation in the early days and weeks after surgery on your heart [<https://medlineplus.gov/hearturgery.html>] , lungs, or esophagus.

What are the symptoms of atrial fibrillation (AFib)?

Some people who have AFib don't have any symptoms and don't know they have it. If you do have symptoms, you may only notice them once in a while. Or you may have symptoms that are more frequent. And in some cases, the symptoms might be severe. If you have heart disease, you are more likely to notice your symptoms. And those symptoms could get worse if your heart disease gets worse.

The symptoms of AFib can include:

- Extreme fatigue, which is the most common symptom
- Heart palpitations (the feeling that your heart is skipping a beat, fluttering, pounding, or beating too hard or too fast)
- Trouble breathing [<https://medlineplus.gov/breathingproblems.html>] , especially when lying down or when exercising
- Chest pain [<https://medlineplus.gov/chestpain.html>]
- Dizziness or fainting [<https://medlineplus.gov/fainting.html>]
- Low blood pressure [<https://medlineplus.gov/lowbloodpressure.html>]

What other problems can AFib cause?

If AFib is not treated, it can lead to serious health problems (complications) such as:

- Stroke
- Heart failure
- Blood clots [<https://medlineplus.gov/bloodclots.html>]
- Sudden cardiac arrest [<https://medlineplus.gov/suddencardiaccrrest.html>] (SCA)
- Cognitive impairment and dementia [<https://medlineplus.gov/dementia.html>]

To help prevent these problems, it's important to contact your health care provider if you are having symptoms. If you do have AFib, the sooner you are diagnosed and treated, the better.

How is atrial fibrillation (AFib) diagnosed?

To find out if you have AFib, your provider:

- Will ask about your medical history, including your symptoms, lifestyle, and any other health conditions you may have
- Will ask about your family history, to find out if you have relatives who have or had AFib
- Will do a physical exam
- May order blood tests
- Will likely order heart tests [<https://medlineplus.gov/hearthealthtests.html>] , such as an electrocardiogram [<https://medlineplus.gov/lab-tests/electrocardiogram/>] (also called an EKG or ECG) and echocardiogram
- May ask you to wear a heart monitor device that records your heart's electrical activity

What are the treatments for atrial fibrillation (AFib)?

The treatments for AFib may include:

- Blood thinner medicines [<https://medlineplus.gov/bloodthinners.html>] that help prevent blood clots from forming.
- Medicines to control your heart's rhythm and rate.
- Following heart-healthy lifestyle changes [<https://medlineplus.gov/howtopreventheartdisease.html>] , such as:
 - Following a heart-healthy eating plan that limits saturated fats [<https://medlineplus.gov/dietaryfats.html>] , salt [<https://medlineplus.gov/sodium.html>] , and cholesterol [<https://medlineplus.gov/cholesterol.html>] . An example is the DASH eating plan [<https://medlineplus.gov/dasheatingplan.html>] .
 - Limiting or avoiding alcohol [<https://medlineplus.gov/alcohol.html>] , because it can increase your heart rate.
 - Aiming for a healthy weight [<https://medlineplus.gov/weightcontrol.html>] .
 - Getting regular physical activity [<https://medlineplus.gov/howmuchexercisedoined.html>] .

- Managing stress [<https://medlineplus.gov/stress.html>] .
- Quitting smoking [<https://medlineplus.gov/quittingsmoking.html>] .
- Procedures such as:
 - Electrical cardioversion, which restores your heart rhythm using low-energy shocks to your heart.
 - Catheter ablation, which scars the tissue that is causing the arrhythmia. The scar tissue blocks the abnormal heart signals.
- Surgeries such as:
 - Surgery to put in a pacemaker [<https://medlineplus.gov/pacemakersandimplantabledefibrillators.html>] to help control the arrhythmia.
 - A Maze procedure, which creates scar tissue in a maze-like pattern in certain parts of the heart.
 - Left atrial appendage closure, a surgery on a small sac in the muscle wall of your left atrium (the upper left chamber of your heart). It helps prevent blood clots and can reduce your risk of stroke. This surgery is for people who are not able to take blood thinners.


Can atrial fibrillation (AFib) be prevented?

There are steps you can take to help lower your risk of atrial fibrillation, such as:



- Making heart-healthy lifestyle changes:
 - Following a heart-healthy eating plan
 - Limiting or avoiding alcohol
 - Aiming for a healthy weight
 - Getting regular physical activity
 - Managing stress
 - Not smoking
- Avoiding illegal drugs, such as cocaine and methamphetamines
- Taking antiarrhythmic medicine (medicine to treat arrhythmia) if you are having heart surgery
- Treating any health conditions that could raise your risk of AFib

NIH: National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute

Start Here

- About Atrial Fibrillation [<https://www.cdc.gov/heart-disease/about/atrial-fibrillation.html>] (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)
- What Is Atrial Fibrillation? [<https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/atrial-fibrillation>]  (National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/es/salud/fibrilacion-auricular>]

Diagnosis and Tests

- Heart Health Tests: MedlinePlus Health Topic [<https://medlineplus.gov/hearthealthtests.html>]  (National Library of Medicine)
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/hearthealthtests.html>]
- Heart Tests [<https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/heart-tests>]  (National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/es/salud/estudios-cardiacos>]
- Recognizing an Irregular Heart Rhythm [<https://doctorsthatdo.osteopathic.org/recognizing-irregular-heart-rhythm>] (American Osteopathic Association)



Prevention and Risk Factors

- Who Is at Risk for Atrial Fibrillation? [<https://www.heart.org/en/health-topics/atrial-fibrillation/who-is-at-risk-for-atrial-fibrillation-af-or-afib>]  (American Heart Association)



Treatments and Therapies

- Antiarrhythmics [<https://www.texasheart.org/heart-health/heart-information-center/topics/antiarrhythmics/>] (Texas Heart Institute)

Also in Spanish [<https://www.texasheart.org/heart-health/heart-information-center/topics/antiarritmicos/>]

- Atrial Fibrillation Medications [<https://www.heart.org/en/health-topics/atrial-fibrillation/treatment-and-prevention-of-atrial-fibrillation/atrial-fibrillation-medications>] (American Heart Association)
- Heart Treatments [<https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/heart-treatments-procedures>]  (National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/es/salud/tratamientos-cardiacos-procedimientos>]
- Maze Surgery [<https://www.texasheart.org/heart-health/heart-information-center/topics/maze-surgery/>] (Texas Heart Institute)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.texasheart.org/heart-health/heart-information-center/topics/cirugia-de-cox/>]
- Treatment Options for Atrial Fibrillation [<https://www.heart.org/en/health-topics/atrial-fibrillation/treatment-and-prevention-of-atrial-fibrillation/treatment-options-of-atrial-fibrillation-afib-or-af>]  (American Heart Association)


Related Issues

- High Blood Pressure, Atrial Fibrillation, and Your Risk of Stroke [<https://www.heart.org/en/health-topics/atrial-fibrillation/why-atrial-fibrillation-af-or-afib-matters/high-blood-pressure-afib-and-your-risk-of-stroke>]  (American Heart Association)
- Substances (That May Affect the Heart's Electrical System) [<https://upbeat.org/lifestyle/substances>] (Heart Rhythm Society)
- Why Atrial Fibrillation Matters [<https://www.heart.org/en/health-topics/atrial-fibrillation/why-atrial-fibrillation-af-or-afib-matters>]  (American Heart Association)


Specifics

- Tachycardia [<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/tachycardia/symptoms-causes/syc-20355127?p=1>]
(Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.mayoclinic.org/es/diseases-conditions/tachycardia/symptoms-causes/syc-20355127?p=1>]

Genetics

- Familial atrial fibrillation: MedlinePlus Genetics [<https://medlineplus.gov/genetics/condition/familial-atrial-fibrillation>]
 (National Library of Medicine)


Videos and Tutorials

- Heartbeat [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/anatomyvideos/000067.htm>]  (Medical Encyclopedia)
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/anatomyvideos/000067.htm>]

Test Your Knowledge

- Heart Palpitations Quiz [https://medlineplus.gov/ency/quiz/003081_33.htm] (Medical Encyclopedia)
Also in Spanish [https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/quiz/003081_120.htm]

Clinical Trials

- ClinicalTrials.gov: Atrial Fibrillation [<https://clinicaltrials.gov/search?cond=%22Atrial+Fibrillation%22&aggFilters=status:not%20rec>]  (National Institutes of Health)


Journal Articles

References and abstracts from MEDLINE/PubMed (National Library of Medicine)


- Article: Effect of spironolactone on monocyte subsets in atrial fibrillation: IMPRESS-AF randomised... [<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/40721437>]
- Article: Durable effectiveness and safety of hybrid ablation versus catheter ablation: 2-year... [<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/40711852>]
- Article: Early mobilisation to enhance recovery following cardiac valvular surgery in atrial... [<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/40670517>]

Atrial Fibrillation -- see more articles [<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/?term=%22Atrial+Fibrillation%22%5Bmajr%3Anoexp%5D+AND+humans%5Bmh%5D+AND+english%5Bla%5D+AND+%22last+1+Year%22+%5Bedat%5D+AND+%28patient+education+handout%5Bpt%5D+OR+guideline%5Bpt%5D+OR+clinical+trial%5Bpt%5D%29++NOT+%28letter%5Bpt%5D+OR+case+reports%5Bpt%5D+OR+editorial%5Bpt%5D+OR+comment%5Bpt%5D%29+AND+free+full+text%5Bsb%5D+>]

Reference Desk

- Heart Information Center [<https://www.texasheart.org/heart-health/heart-information-center/>] (Texas Heart Institute)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.texasheart.org/heart-health/heart-information-center/topics/glosario-de-terminologia-cardiovascular/>]
- How the Heart Works [<https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/heart>]  (National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/es/salud/corazon>]

Find an Expert

- American Heart Association [<https://www.heart.org/en/>]
- National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute [<https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/>] 

Patient Handouts

- Atrial fibrillation - discharge [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000237.htm>] (Medical Encyclopedia)
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/patientinstructions/000237.htm>]
- Atrial fibrillation and atrial flutter [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/000184.htm>] (Medical Encyclopedia)
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/article/000184.htm>]
- Cardiac ablation procedures [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/007368.htm>] (Medical Encyclopedia)
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/article/007368.htm>]
- Electrocardiogram [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/003868.htm>] (Medical Encyclopedia)
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/article/003868.htm>]
- Holter monitor (24h) [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/003877.htm>] (Medical Encyclopedia)
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/article/003877.htm>]



MEDICAL ENCYCLOPEDIA

- Atrial fibrillation - discharge [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000237.htm>]
- Atrial fibrillation and atrial flutter [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/000184.htm>]
- Cardiac ablation procedures [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/007368.htm>]
- Cardiac event monitors [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/007700.htm>]
- Digitalis toxicity [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/000165.htm>]
- Heart palpitations [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/003081.htm>]

Heartbeat [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/anatomyvideos/000067.htm>]

Related Health Topics

Arrhythmia [<https://medlineplus.gov/arrhythmia.html>]

Heart Health Tests [<https://medlineplus.gov/hearthealthtests.html>]

National Institutes of Health

The primary NIH organization for research on *Atrial Fibrillation* is the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute [<http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/>]

Other Languages

Find health information in languages other than English [<https://medlineplus.gov/languages/atrialfibrillation.html>] on *Atrial Fibrillation*

NIH MedlinePlus Magazine

Atrial Fibrillation: What You Need to Know [<https://magazine.medlineplus.gov/article/atrial-fibrillation-what-you-need-to-know>]

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar Speaks out about Heart Health [https://magazine.medlineplus.gov/article/kareem_abdul-jabbar-speaks_out_about_heart_health]

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