

Patient information: Atrial fibrillation (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

What is atrial fibrillation? — Atrial fibrillation is the most common heart rhythm problem people have ([figure 1](#)). The condition puts you at risk of stroke, heart attack, and other problems. Another term for atrial fibrillation is “A-fib.”

In people with A-fib, the electrical signals that control the heartbeat become abnormal. As a result, the top 2 chambers of the heart stop pumping effectively, and a small amount of the blood that should move out of these chambers gets left behind. As the blood pools, it can start to form clots. These clots can travel to the brain through the blood vessels, and cause strokes.

In some people, A-fib never goes away. In others, A-fib can come and go. If you had one or more bouts of A-fib, but have a normal heart rhythm now, ask your doctor what you can do to keep A-fib from coming back. Some people can reduce their chances of having A-fib again by:

- Controlling their blood pressure
- Not drinking a lot of alcohol in one sitting (limit to 1 to 2 drinks in one day)
- Cutting down on caffeine
- Getting treatment for an overactive thyroid gland
- Getting regular exercise

What are the symptoms of atrial fibrillation? — Some people with A-fib have no symptoms. When symptoms do occur, they can include:

- Feeling as though your heart is racing, skipping beats, or beating out of sync
- Mild chest “tightness” or pain
- Feeling lightheaded, dizzy, or like you might pass out
- Having trouble breathing, especially with exercise

Is there a test for atrial fibrillation? — Yes. If your doctor or nurse suspects you have A-fib, he or she will probably do a test called an electrocardiogram. This test, also known as an “ECG” or “EKG,” measures the electrical activity in your heart.

How is atrial fibrillation treated? — Treatment can include one or more of these:

- Medicines to control the speed or rhythm of the heartbeat
- Medicines to keep clots from forming
- A treatment called “cardioversion” that involves applying a mild electrical current to the heart to fix its rhythm
- Treatments called “ablation,” which use heat (“radiofrequency ablation”) or cold (“cryoablation”) to destroy the small part of the heart that is sending abnormal electrical signals
- A device called a pacemaker that is implanted in your body and sends electrical signals to the heart to control the heartbeat
- Surgery to create scar tissue in the heart to block the flow of electrical signals

What will my life be like? — Many people with A-fib are able to live normal lives. Still, it is important that you take the medicines your doctor prescribes every day. Taking your medicines as directed can help

reduce the chances that your A-fib will cause a stroke. It's also a good idea to learn what the signs and symptoms of a stroke are ([figure 2](#)).

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[Patient information: ECG and stress test \(The Basics\)](#)

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[Patient information: Medicines to prevent and treat blood clots: Warfarin \(Coumadin\) \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient information: Medicines for atrial fibrillation \(The Basics\)](#)

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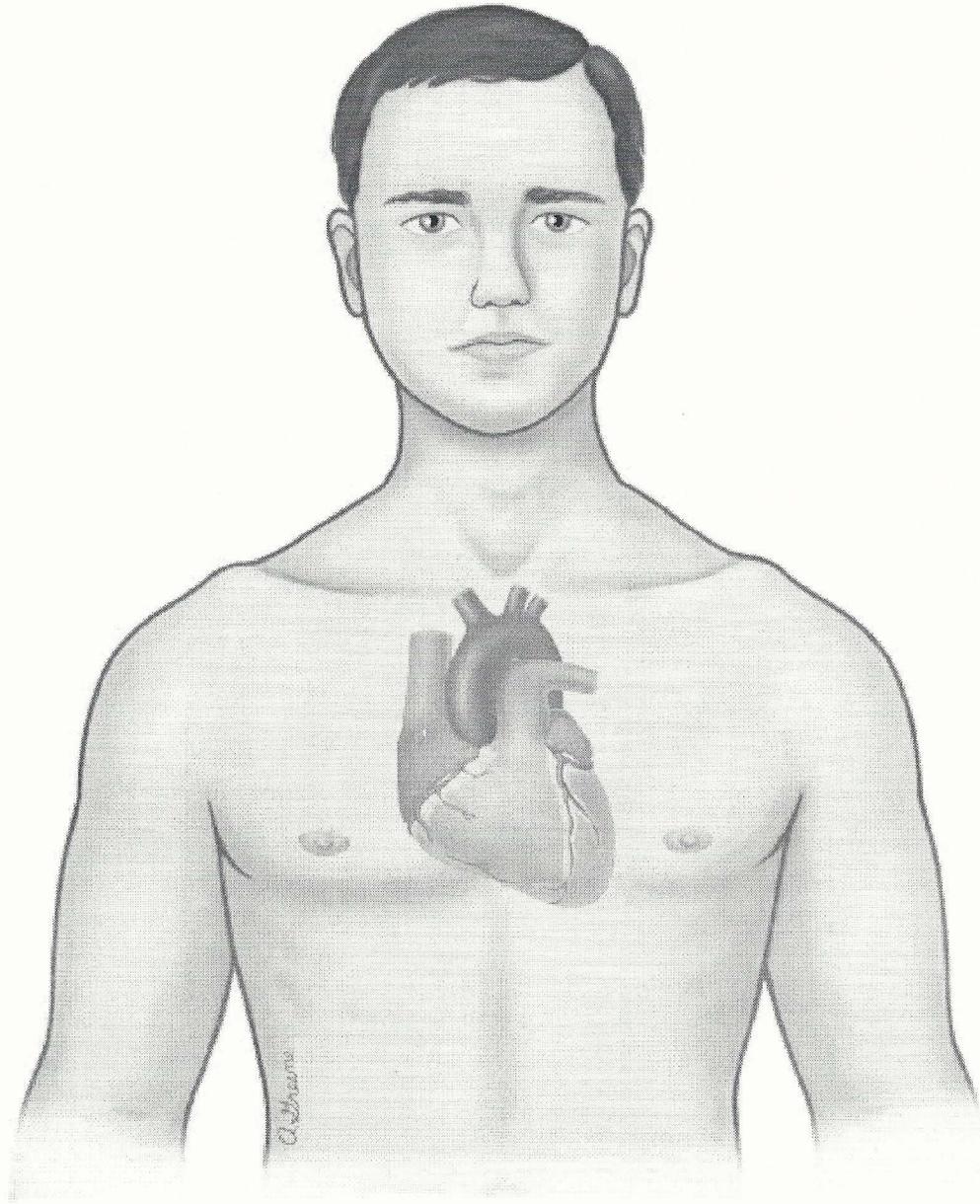
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GRAPHICS

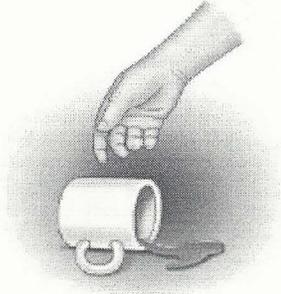
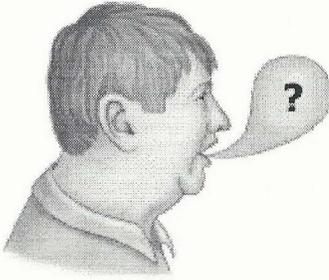
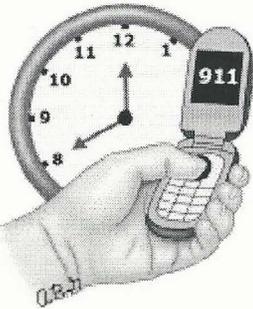
Atrial fibrillation



This drawing shows where the heart is located in the chest. In atrial fibrillation, the electrical signals that control the heartbeat become abnormal. As a result, the top two chambers of the heart (shown in purple) stop pumping effectively, and blood that should move out of these chambers gets left behind.

Graphic 76873 Version 2.0

Signs of stroke

F		F ace is uneven
A		A rm is weak
S		S peech is strange
T		T ime to call an ambulance In the US and Canada, dial 9-1-1

The letters in the word "fast" help you remember the signs of stroke. If a person shows any of these signs, call an ambulance right away. In the US and Canada, dial 9-1-1.