



Thrombosis Canada



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# You Have Atrial Fibrillation (AFIB)

## What is atrial fibrillation?

Atrial fibrillation is the most common form of heart rhythm disorder (arrhythmia).

Atrial fibrillation increases with age: it affects 1 out of 1000 people less than 55 years, but atrial fibrillation affects 1 in 10 people older than 80 years of age.

Atrial fibrillation is commonly known as AFIB or AF.

## Why is atrial fibrillation important?

When atrial fibrillation occurs, the heart beats very irregularly. When this happens, the ability of the heart to pump blood is decreased.

Some people who have atrial fibrillation have no symptoms and are not aware they have it. Other people with atrial fibrillation are aware that their heart is beating more quickly than normal or is "racing"; some may be aware of the irregular heart beating (palpitations); and some may have shortness of breath. Patients with atrial fibrillation may form abnormal blood clots in the heart. These blood clots can dislodge from the heart and travel to the brain (embolism) producing a stroke, or they may affect other parts of the body including the legs, kidneys or bowel.

## Why does atrial fibrillation occur?

Atrial fibrillation is much more common in older people, those with high blood pressure and those with heart conditions including coronary artery disease, heart valve problems or heart failure.

Atrial fibrillation can also be associated with thyroid disease, diabetes, surgery, or alcohol abuse.

## How can the risk of having an embolism be determined?

Doctors can estimate the risk of an embolism using a score such as the CHADS<sub>2</sub> or the CHA<sub>2</sub>DS<sub>2</sub>-VASc. Both scores take into account age, any prior stroke or mini-stroke (transient ischemic attack) and medical history (including high blood pressure, diabetes, heart failure and vascular disease). The higher the score, the greater is the chance of having an embolism. As an example, a woman who is older than 75 years and has a history of high blood pressure has a risk of stroke of about 4% per year.

If someone has no risk factors for embolism, the risk would be less than 2% per year.

## How can the risk of a stroke or other embolism be reduced?

It is important for people with atrial fibrillation to have excellent management of any underlying risk factors; for example, they should stop smoking, have good control of high blood pressure and diabetes. For the vast majority of people with atrial fibrillation, an anticoagulant taken by mouth is recommended. Anticoagulants are sometimes called "blood thinners".

Anticoagulants are very effective at reducing the risk of stroke. On average, anticoagulants reduce the yearly risk of stroke by 60% or more. The most common anticoagulants include warfarin or newer anticoagulants including apixaban, dabigatran or rivaroxaban.

## Take Away Message

- Atrial fibrillation is the most common abnormal heart arrhythmia
- Atrial fibrillation increases the risks of stroke or other embolism
- Most people with atrial fibrillation should be prescribed an oral anticoagulant



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