

A BETTER BEAT:

Why AFib matters

Atrial fibrillation, or “AFib,” is an irregular or rapid heartbeat. It happens when the upper chambers of the heart don’t pump as they should. The American Heart Association says many people don’t realize that AFib can be an extremely dangerous condition. In fact, if AFib isn’t treated, it can lead to dangerous blood clots and stroke. It can also make the heart get weaker and enlarged, causing congestive heart failure.



Symptoms of AFib

It can be hard to know whether you have AFib, because symptoms can be different for each person.

- Heartbeat that feels fast, irregular, “thumping,” or fluttering
- Feeling tired, weak or dizzy
- Shortness of breath and/or anxiety
- Sweating
- Feeling very fatigued during exercise
- Confusion
- Chest pain or pressure: This is also a sign of heart attack. Call 9-1-1 if you notice this symptom. If you think you could be having a heart attack, don’t wait. Get emergency medical help immediately.

It’s important to talk to your doctor about your AFib symptoms and how to manage them. Some conditions like diabetes and heart disease, or having a family history of AFib, mean you could be at higher risk for AFib.

Preventing AFib

Like many heart conditions, the risk of AFib can be lowered by following a healthy lifestyle. This may include:

- Regular exercise
- A healthy diet low in saturated and *trans* fats, sodium (salt), and cholesterol
- Not smoking: if you smoke, get help quitting at www.smokefree.gov
- Getting checked for – and treating – high blood pressure (hypertension)
- Keeping cholesterol under control and getting regular cholesterol checks
- Working toward a healthy weight, if weight loss is needed
- Avoiding high amounts of alcohol and caffeine
- Treating obstructive sleep apnea, a sleep disorder that increases the risk of AFib.

Treating AFib

Treatment for AFib will depend on a person’s health history and how severe the AFib is. Some people may need medications, such as blood thinners and drugs that reduce clotting. Some people can keep AFib under control with blood pressure medicine.

A procedure known as electrical cardioversion may be performed when medications aren’t suitable. This is a non-surgical procedure that helps “reset” the heart’s rhythm. Other non-surgical procedures may also be discussed. In some cases, surgery may be needed. Only you and your doctor can determine what treatment is best for you.