

Atrial Fibrillation (AF)

Atrial Fibrillation (AF) causes an irregular heartbeat. There are various causes of AF. Medication can slow a fast heart rate and ease symptoms. Sometimes treatment can restore the heart rhythm back to normal. In addition, a medicine to prevent clots forming is usually advised to reduce the risk of having a stroke.

What is Atrial Fibrillation (AF)?

If you have AF:

- Your heart rate is usually (but not always) a lot faster than normal.
- Your heartbeat is irregular - that is, an abnormal heart rhythm (an arrhythmia).
- The force of each heartbeat can vary in intensity.

Therefore, if you have AF and feel your pulse, you may count up to 180 beats per minute. Also, the force of each beat can vary and the pulse feels erratic.

How common is Atrial Fibrillation (AF)?

It is common but mainly occurs in older people. Nearly 50,000 cases are diagnosed each year in the UK. It becomes more common with increasing age. About 1 in 200 people aged 50-60 years have AF. This rises to around 1 in 10 people aged over 80 years.

What causes Atrial Fibrillation (AF)?

Causes of AF include the following:

- High blood pressure, coronary heart disease, heart valve problems, pericardial disease and heart muscle problems. Other conditions include: an overactive thyroid gland, pneumonia, pulmonary embolus, obesity, lung cancer, drinking a lot of alcohol, drinking a lot of caffeine (tea, coffee, etc).
- In about 1 in 10 cases of AF there is no apparent cause, this is called 'lone AF'.

What are the symptoms of Atrial Fibrillation (AF)?

Symptoms often develop quickly, soon after the AF develops. Possible symptoms include:

- A 'thumping' heart (palpitations). You may feel it beating in a fast and irregular way.
- Dizziness.
- Chest pains (angina) may develop.
- Breathlessness is often the first symptom that develops. It may occur all the time but you may become breathless just when you exert yourself, such as when you walk up stairs.

Many people with AF have no symptoms, particularly if their heart rate is not very fast. The AF may then be diagnosed by chance when a doctor or nurse feels your pulse.

Are any tests needed for Atrial Fibrillation (AF)?

- A heart tracing called an electrocardiogram (ECG) usually confirms the diagnosis. Sometimes a 24-hour ECG is needed if your AF comes and goes and the resting ECG has not showed it.
- Other tests such as blood tests and an ultrasound scan of the heart, called an echocardiogram, are often advised. These tests look for an underlying cause of AF, such as a heart problem or an overactive thyroid gland.

What are the possible complications of Atrial Fibrillation (AF)?

An increased risk of having a stroke (or other blood clot problem)

The main complication of AF is an increased risk of having a stroke. AF causes turbulent blood flow in the heart chambers. This **sometimes** leads to a small blood clot forming in a heart chamber.

A clot can travel in the blood vessels until it becomes stuck in a smaller blood vessel in the brain (or sometimes in another part of the body). Part of the blood supply to the brain may then be cut off, which causes a stroke.

Other complications

Less common complications of AF include the following:

- Heart failure
- Chest pains (angina) may become worse if you have angina.

What are the treatment options for Atrial Fibrillation (AF)?

Treatments that may be considered include:

- Rate control. This means bringing the heart rate back down to normal. This is done for all people with AF who have a fast heart rate (that is, most cases).
- Rhythm control. This means converting the irregular rhythm back to a normal regular rhythm. This is only possible in some cases.
- Anticoagulation treatment which aims to prevent a stroke.
- Other treatments in certain circumstances.

Patient Experience

We know that being admitted to hospital can be a difficult and unsettling time for you and your loved ones. If you have any questions or concerns, please do speak with a member of staff on the ward or in the relevant department who will do their best to answer your questions and reassure you.

Feedback

Feedback is really important and useful to us – it can tell us where we are working well and where improvements can be made. There are lots of ways you can share your experience with us including completing our Friends and Family Test – cards are available and can be posted on all wards, departments and clinics at our hospitals. We value your comments and feedback and thank you for taking the time to share this with us.

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

If you have any concerns or questions about your care, we advise you to talk with the nurse in charge or the department manager in the first instance as they are best placed to answer any questions or resolve concerns quickly. If the relevant member of staff is unable to help resolve your concern, you can contact the PALS Team. We offer informal help, advice or support about any aspect of hospital services & experiences.

Our PALS team will liaise with the various departments in our hospitals on your behalf, if you feel unable to do so, to resolve your problems and where appropriate refer to outside help.

If you are still unhappy you can contact the Complaints Department, who can investigate your concerns. You can make a complaint orally, electronically or in writing and we can advise and guide you through the complaints procedure.

How to contact PALS:

Telephone Patient Services: 0300 123 1732 or via email at: wah-tr.PALS@nhs.net

Opening times:

The PALS telephone lines are open Monday to Friday from 8.30am to 4.00pm. Please be aware that you may need to leave a voicemail message, but we aim to return your call within one working day. If you are unable to understand this leaflet, please communicate with a member of staff.

For additional medical advice, if your symptoms or condition worsens:

Contact your GP

NHS 111:

Get help with your symptoms, NHS111:
Information to help you manage your health:

Telephone 111

<https://111.nhs.uk/>
www.nhs.uk

In an emergency telephone 999

Emergency Department (A&E)
Alexandra Hospital
Woodrow Drive
Redditch B98 7UB

Tel: 01527 512030

Minor Injury Unit
Kidderminster Hospital
Bewdley Road
Kidderminster DY11 6RJ

Tel: 01562 513039

Emergency Department (A&E)
Worcestershire Royal Hospital
Charles Hastings Way
Worcester WR5 1DD

Tel: 01905 760743