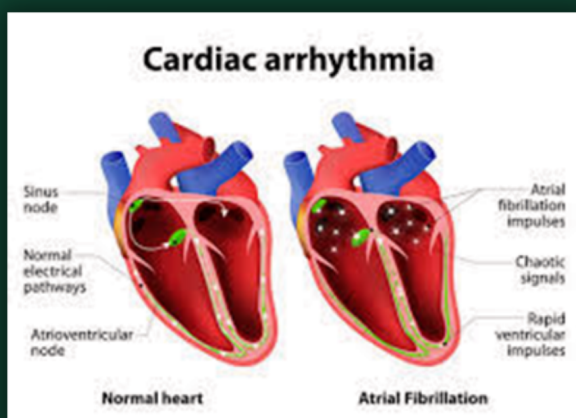


IRREGULAR HEARTBEAT

What is atrial fibrillation and is it serious

Atrial fibrillation (AF) is an irregular heartbeat. It is caused by a failure of the heart's natural pacemaker, which is responsible for managing the contractions of the heart.

Under normal circumstances the pacemaker first makes two chambers at the top of the heart (the atria) contract, squeezing blood into the lower chambers (the ventricles). These in turn are triggered to contract, squeezing blood into the arteries.



In atrial fibrillation, a malfunction of the pacemaker interrupts this sequence of contractions causing the atria to twitch erratically - known as fibrillation - and the ventricles to contract more often and irregularly.

Not surprisingly the heart works less effectively as a pump in atrial fibrillation, resulting in symptoms like a rapid heart rate, difficulty breathing, tiredness and light-headedness. Now there are also areas within the heart where blood flow is slow or stagnant. Where this happens blood clots can form and it is these that account for the increased risk of stroke associated with atrial fibrillation.

Why atrial fibrillation increases your stroke risk

The problem with a blood clot in the heart is that some or all of it can break away and travel along major blood vessels directly into the brain.

As these very large blood vessels branch and get smaller/narrower in size, at some stage the clot or piece of clot is going to be too large to travel any further and will block the blood vessel in which it is travelling.

This means that the area of the brain beyond the clot can no longer receive the oxygen and nutrients that the blood normally delivers, causing the nerve cells to stop working and ultimately die.

This is what happens in a stroke - or more specifically in a ischemic stroke (meaning one caused by an interruption in the blood supply). Because clots forming in the heart may be quite big, they can block the larger blood vessels that supply large areas of the brain.

Consequently, strokes arising from an irregular heartbeat or atrial fibrillation can be very serious, which is why it is so important to prevent clots forming in the heart.



How to avoid a stroke from atrial fibrillation

If you have atrial fibrillation, you are at an increased risk of stroke due to the formation of blood clots in the heart. So, what can be done to reduce this risk?

Your risk of stroke depends on several factors – age, gender, diabetes, high blood pressure, vascular disease and history of previous strokes. Cardiac electrophysiologist Dr. Shang-Chiun Lee with Mercy Clinic Cardiology has seven things you can do to help lower your risk of stroke while living with AFib:

Get your AFib under control. By itself, AFib isn't too dangerous, but the potential complication of a stroke can be deadly. Several medications can be used to control the rate or rhythm of your heart. One of those is a blood thinner, designed to decrease the risk of stroke by keeping blood from clotting. Discuss the options with your doctor who can develop a strategy designed for you.

Cardiac ablation is also an option to alleviate discomfort or symptoms of AFib. An ablation is a minimally-invasive procedure in which the doctor destroys (by burning or freezing) tissue in your heart that's sending the wrong electrical signals. This procedure reroutes the signals to get your heartbeat regular again. Even after an ablation, your doctor may recommend you take blood thinners to lower your stroke risk.

Exercise

Being inactive or obese can raise your risk of stroke, high blood pressure, diabetes, high cholesterol and heart disease. Getting at least 30 minutes of activity each day offers many health benefits and can decrease your risk of these diseases.

Maintain a healthy weight

If you're carrying extra pounds, you're more likely to have high blood pressure, heart problems and diabetes. These conditions make a stroke more likely. Your target blood pressure should be 120/80. Take your blood pressure twice a day, and share the numbers with your doctor.

Incorporate fruits, vegetables, whole grains and healthy fibre into your daily diet

Even though it can be tempting, try to avoid sugary drinks and sweets.

Avoid alcohol

Regular alcohol use can lead to a stroke. Women who have more than one drink a day and men who drink an average of more than two drinks a day tend to have higher blood pressure, increasing stroke risk.

Don't smoke

Research links many diseases to smoking, such as stroke, heart disease, lung cancer and respiratory issues. Quitting will significantly reduce the risk of disease.

Keep diabetes in check.

Diabetes and AFib are linked in several ways, and they both increase your risk for stroke and heart disease. It's important to get control of your blood sugar so you can control your AFib symptoms.

Get quality sleep.

Researchers have discovered a connection between people getting less than six hours of sleep a night and stroke. Sleep apnea, a sleep disorder that affects your breathing, is also associated with stroke risk factors like high blood pressure, AFib, heart failure and diabetes. If you are snoring at night, talk to your doctor about getting a sleep study.

