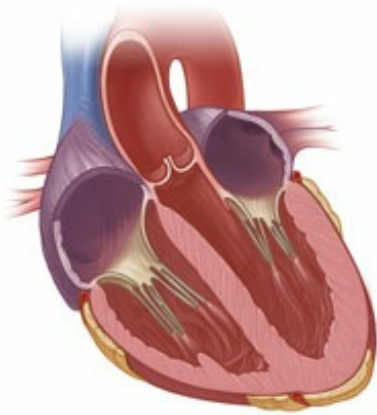


# Atrial Fibrillation: Care Instructions



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## Your Care Instructions

Atrial fibrillation is an irregular and often fast heartbeat. Treating this condition is important for several reasons. It can cause blood clots, which can travel from your heart to your brain and cause a stroke. If you have a fast heartbeat, you may feel lightheaded, dizzy, and weak. An irregular heartbeat can also increase your risk for heart failure.

Atrial fibrillation is often the result of another heart condition, such as high blood pressure or coronary artery disease. Making changes to improve your heart condition will help you stay healthy and active.

**Follow-up care is a key part of your treatment and safety.** Be sure to make and go to all appointments, and call your doctor if you are having problems. It's also a good idea to know your test results and keep a list of the medicines you take.

## How can you care for yourself at home?

### Medicines

- Take your medicines exactly as prescribed. Call your doctor if you think you are having a problem with your medicine. You will get more details on the specific medicines your doctor prescribes.
- If your doctor has given you a blood thinner to prevent a stroke, be sure you get instructions about how to take your medicine safely. Blood thinners can cause serious bleeding problems.
- Do not take any vitamins, over-the-counter drugs, or herbal products without talking to your doctor first.

### Lifestyle changes

- Do not smoke. Smoking can increase your chance of a stroke and heart attack. If you need help quitting, talk to your doctor about stop-smoking programs and medicines. These can increase your chances of quitting for good.
- Eat a heart-healthy diet.
- Stay at a healthy weight. Lose weight if you need to.
- Limit alcohol to 2 drinks a day for men and 1 drink a day for women. Too much alcohol can cause health problems.
- Avoid colds and flu. Get a pneumococcal vaccine shot. If you have had one before, ask your

doctor whether you need another dose. Get a flu shot every year. If you must be around people with colds or flu, wash your hands often.

## Activity

- If your doctor recommends it, get more exercise. Walking is a good choice. Bit by bit, increase the amount you walk every day. Try for at least 30 minutes on most days of the week. You also may want to swim, bike, or do other activities. Your doctor may suggest that you join a cardiac rehabilitation program so that you can have help increasing your physical activity safely.
- Start light exercise if your doctor says it is okay. Even a small amount will help you get stronger, have more energy, and manage stress. Walking is an easy way to get exercise. Start out by walking a little more than you did in the hospital. Gradually increase the amount you walk.
- When you exercise, watch for signs that your heart is working too hard. You are pushing too hard if you cannot talk while you are exercising. If you become short of breath or dizzy or have chest pain, sit down and rest immediately.
- Check your pulse regularly. Place two fingers on the artery at the palm side of your wrist, in line with your thumb. If your heartbeat seems uneven or fast, talk to your doctor.

## When should you call for help?

Call 911 anytime you think you may need emergency care. For example, call if:

- You have symptoms of a heart attack. These may include:
  - Chest pain or pressure, or a strange feeling in the chest.
  - Sweating.
  - Shortness of breath.
  - Nausea or vomiting.
  - Pain, pressure, or a strange feeling in the back, neck, jaw, or upper belly or in one or both shoulders or arms.
  - Lightheadedness or sudden weakness.
  - A fast or irregular heartbeat.

After you call 911, the operator may tell you to chew 1 adult-strength or 2 to 4 low-dose aspirin. Wait for an ambulance. Do not try to drive yourself.

- You have symptoms of a stroke. These may include:
  - Sudden numbness, tingling, weakness, or loss of movement in your face, arm, or leg, especially on only one side of your body.
  - Sudden vision changes.
  - Sudden trouble speaking.
  - Sudden confusion or trouble understanding simple statements.
  - Sudden problems with walking or balance.
  - A sudden, severe headache that is different from past headaches.
- You passed out (lost consciousness).

Call your doctor now or seek immediate medical care if:

- You have new or increased shortness of breath.
- You feel dizzy or lightheaded, or you feel like you may faint.
- Your heart rate becomes irregular.
- You can feel your heart flutter in your chest or skip heartbeats. Tell your doctor if these symptoms are new or worse.

Watch closely for changes in your health, and be sure to contact your doctor if you have any problems.

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