

Atrial Fibrillation | Your Quick Guide

For more information on Atrial Fibrillation visit www.keepthebeat.ie or talk to your doctor

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Content

What is Atrial Fibrillation?	02
What causes AFib?	03
What does AFib feel like?	04
How is Atrial Fibrillation diagnosed?	05
10 tips to reduce your risk	06

•———— What is Atrial Fibrillation? ————•

Atrial Fibrillation (AFib) is a type of arrhythmia – when your heart starts beating out of rhythm, sometimes quite fast. When this happens the upper chambers of the heart (the Atria) do not pump in the normal way which may cause blood to pool and clot. A part of the clot may break off and travel in the bloodstream to the brain, where it lodges, causing a stroke.

People with AFib are **five times more likely to have a stroke**¹.



If you have AFib, it's important to know that you're not alone. In fact, it's the most common heart rhythm disorder in Ireland – and is more common the older you get.

¹ <https://irishheart.ie/news/feel-pulse-reduce-risk-stroke-says-irish-heart/>

•———— What causes AFib? ————•

The causes of Atrial Fibrillation are not always clear and for many people no underlying cause is found. However, there are **risk factors** which increase your likelihood of developing AFib. These include:

- Increasing age
- Coronary heart disease, previous heart attack
- Disease of heart valves
- Heart failure
- High blood pressure
- Overactive thyroid gland
- Heart defects you're born with (congenital)
- Lung infections, such as pneumonia
- Pulmonary embolism (blood clots)
- Heart or lung surgery
- Exposure to stimulants, such as medications, caffeine, tobacco or alcohol abuse*

* Alcohol abuse, such as drinking large amounts of alcohol over a long time, is a major factor in people developing Atrial Fibrillation. Even young people can get Atrial Fibrillation after binge-drinking occasions.

•———— What does AFib feel like? ————•

AFib can feel different for different people. There's no 'one way' to feel when you have AFib. People can have any one of the symptoms below, a combination of them or none of them at all. This means many people are living with AFib and don't know it.



Palpitations



Feeling faint



Dizziness



Chest pain



Breathlessness



Feeling tired



Less able to be active

How is Atrial Fibrillation diagnosed?

Atrial Fibrillation can only be diagnosed following a check-up with your doctor. Your doctor or nurse can detect AFib through regular pulse checks.

The recommended normal heart rate is between 60 and 100 heartbeats per minute but some people can have heart rates over 100. And you should see your doctor if you have a persistent heart rate above 120 beats per minute or below 40 beats per minute.

It is important to talk to your doctor if you have symptoms of Atrial Fibrillation.

Your doctor will ask you about your medical history, give you a medical examination and arrange for an Electrocardiogram (ECG) – a test which confirms your heart rhythm.

Other investigations may include: An echocardiogram of your heart, similar to an ultrasound or a 24 hour ECG monitoring (Holter Monitor).



10 tips to reduce your risk

Make small lifestyle changes that have a big impact on reducing your risk of AFib

It is important to make changes to your lifestyle to manage your Atrial Fibrillation and to reduce your overall risk of getting high blood pressure, heart disease or stroke.

1. Have regular pulse checks: Regular visits with your doctor/nurse allow you to monitor your overall heart health – tracking your pulse, blood pressure and cholesterol.



2. Know the signs and symptoms: Understanding Atrial Fibrillation and the triggers for you are important. It can help you reduce your symptoms and shape a diet and exercise routine that is the best fit for you.

3. Be active: It's important to discuss any planned exercise routine with your doctor or nurse to find out what a safe and reasonable level of activity is for you. Your heart's rhythm and rate may change during exercise. If you are prescribed medication to slow your heart rate, you may find that your heart rate does not increase as much with activity. Don't worry – this is normal and you will still reap the benefits of physical activity and you can get more active every day.



4. Eat a healthy diet: Eat more fruit, vegetables and wholegrain foods which are good for your heart health. Cut down on high-salt processed foods which can increase your blood pressure. Some foods may interact with your medication, so, always ask your doctor, nurse or dietitian for advice on what type of foods to eat. You can find simple, heart healthy recipes on the Irish Heart Foundation website.

www.irishheart.ie/recipes/

5. Manage your weight: You can eat delicious, nutritious food without feeling like you're depriving yourself. Start by considering the size of your food portions. Learn to recognise hunger. Oven-bake, grill, boil, poach, stir-fry, steam or microwave food instead of frying.

6. Be aware of alcohol and caffeine: For some people, alcohol and caffeine can trigger episodes of AFib. If you feel symptoms of AFib after drinking either alcohol or caffeine, it is recommended you avoid them.



7. Avoid smoking: Smoking can trigger AFib. If you smoke, try to quit as it further increases your risk of heart attack and stroke.

8. Take your medication as prescribed: Some over-the-counter medicines such as herbal remedies (like St John's Wort) can make your Atrial Fibrillation worse or may affect other medications you are taking. Always take medicine you are prescribed as directed by your doctor.

9. Watch your stress levels: For some people feeling stressed can be a trigger for AFib. Take time to relax each day – try meditating or taking a walk. Try not to take on too many things at once and don't be afraid to say no to some things.

10. Learn to relax: Take time out for yourself and keep in touch with friends. If you are feeling overwhelmed, share it with a loved one or friend. Rely on your support network.





Helping you Keep the Beat

If you have any questions about Atrial Fibrillation,
speak to your doctor or nurse and they'll be able to
help or visit keepthebeat.ie.