

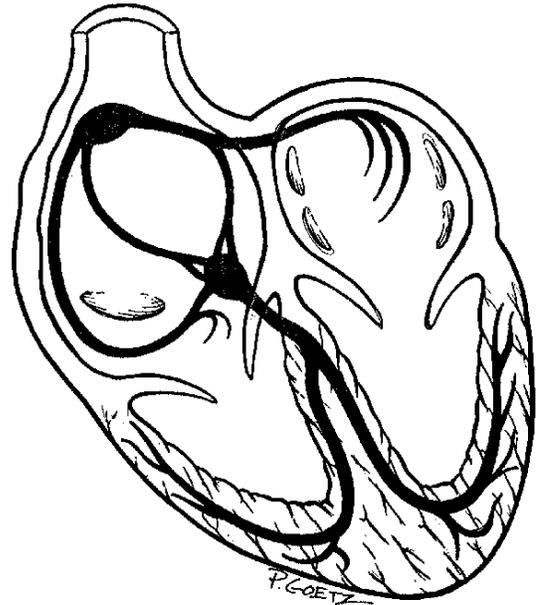
# What is Atrial Fibrillation?

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Normally, your heart contracts and relaxes to a regular beat. Your heart beats because certain cells in your heart make electric signals that cause the heart to contract and pump blood. These electrical signals show up on an electrocardiogram, or ECG recording. Your doctor can read your ECG to find out if the electric signals are normal.

In atrial fibrillation, part of the heart doesn't beat the way it should. Instead of beating in a regular, normal pattern, part of the heart beats irregularly and too fast. It's important for the heart to pump properly, because that's how your body gets the oxygen and food it needs.

You can live with atrial fibrillation, but it can lead to other rhythm problems, chronic fatigue, heart failure and — worst of all — stroke. You'll need a doctor to help you control the problem.



Your heart has a natural pacemaker, called "sinus node," that makes electrical signals. These signals cause the heart to contract and pump blood.

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## How do I know I have atrial fibrillation?

Here are some of the symptoms you may experience:

- Irregular and rapid heartbeat
- Heart palpitations or rapid thumping inside the chest
- Dizziness, sweating and chest pain or pressure
- Shortness of breath, anxiety
- Tiring more easily when exercising
- Fainting (syncope)

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## What can correct it?

- Sometimes atrial fibrillation can be corrected with an electric shock. This shock may change the beat of your heart back to normal.
- You may take medicine, such as digitalis. It can return your heart rate to a normal rhythm. Ask your doctor, nurse or pharmacist about this drug.
- You may need surgery or other procedures. It depends on the underlying cause and your level of disability.

## How can I lower my risk of stroke?

- Your doctor may prescribe drugs to prevent blood clots from forming. Two examples are anticoagulants and antiplatelets such as aspirin and warfarin.
- Always tell your doctor, dentist and pharmacist that you take aspirin or warfarin.
- If you have any unusual bleeding or bruising or other problems, tell your doctor right away.

## How can I learn more?

1. Talk to your doctor, nurse or other health-care professionals. If you have heart disease or have had a stroke, members of your family also may be at higher risk. It's very important for them to make changes now to lower their risk.
2. Call 1-800-AHA-USA1 (1-800-242-8721), or visit [americanheart.org](http://americanheart.org) to learn more about heart disease.
3. For more information on stroke, call 1-888-4-STROKE (1-888-478-7653) or visit us online at [StrokeAssociation.org](http://StrokeAssociation.org).

We have many other fact sheets and educational booklets to help you make healthier choices to reduce your risk, manage disease or care for a loved one.

Knowledge is power, so *Learn and Live!*

## What are the Warning Signs of Heart Attack and Stroke?

### Warning Signs of Heart Attack:

Some heart attacks are sudden and intense, but most of them start slowly with mild pain or discomfort with one or more of these symptoms:

- Chest discomfort
- Discomfort in other areas of the upper body
- Shortness of breath with or without chest discomfort
- Other signs including breaking out in a cold sweat, nausea or lightheadedness

### Warning Signs of Stroke:

- Sudden weakness or numbness of the face, arm or leg, especially on one side of the body
- Sudden confusion, trouble speaking or understanding
- Sudden trouble seeing in one or both eyes
- Sudden trouble walking, dizziness, loss of balance or coordination
- Sudden, severe headache with no known cause

Learn to recognize a stroke. Time lost is brain lost.

Call 9-1-1... Get to a hospital immediately if you experience signs of a heart attack or stroke!

## Do you have questions or comments for your doctor or nurse?

- Take a few minutes to write your own questions for the next time you see your healthcare provider. For example:

What should my pulse be? \_\_\_\_\_

How do I take my pulse? \_\_\_\_\_

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