

# Atrial Fibrillation and Flutter

*Expertise in Matters of the Heart*

More than 2.2 million people in the United States have been affected by atrial fibrillation, commonly called “a-fib.” It is one of the most common and treatable irregular heart rhythms.

The risk of atrial fibrillation increases with age; about 70 percent of a-fib patients are 65-85 years old. Although atrial fibrillation is not life threatening, it needs to be treated to improve heart function and prevent complications.

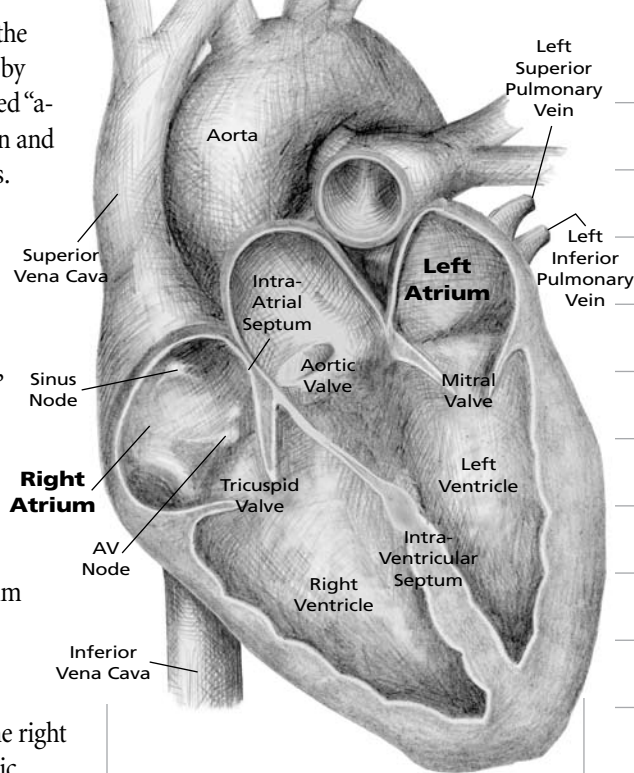
## What are atrial fibrillation and atrial flutter?

Atrial fibrillation is a heart rhythm disorder. In atrial fibrillation, the electrical impulses that control contractions of the heart’s upper chambers (the left atrium and the right atrium) become rapid and chaotic. Atrial flutter is similar, but only a single electrical wave circulates very rapidly in the upper chambers. In both a-fib and atrial flutter, the heart beats irregularly and rapidly—sometimes more than 300 beats per minute! This makes it difficult for the chambers to properly pump out all the blood they contain, which tires the heart and can lead to clotting.

## Causes

In many people, there is no apparent cause of atrial fibrillation and flutter. Some known causes include:

- coronary artery disease



- heart attack
- chronic lung disease
- after heart or lung surgery

## Symptoms

A common symptom of atrial fibrillation and flutter is palpitations. These can be felt as fluttering, pounding or racing heartbeats. However, not all palpitations mean a person is having a-fib or flutter. All of us, at some time in our lives, will likely feel a slight flutter in the chest or a skip of a heartbeat. This is common and may be a reaction to fear, stress or excitement. Other symptoms of atrial fibrillation include dizziness,

fainting, shortness of breath, fatigue and chest discomfort. Some people never feel any symptoms at all and are unaware that they are in a-fib or flutter.

## What is an electrophysiologist?

An electrophysiologist (EP) is a cardiologist who specializes in the diagnosis, prevention and treatment of abnormal heart rhythms, or arrhythmias. EPs are medical doctors who have completed specialty training in general cardiology, followed by two or more years of additional training in the diagnosis and treatment of heart conditions of the electrical system of

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the heart. If you have a-fib or flutter, you may see an EP, who will make or confirm the diagnosis and recommend appropriate treatment.

**Testing for a-fib and flutter**

The most common test to check for atrial fibrillation is the electrocardiogram (EKG). However, because atrial fibrillation may come and go, it is possible that an EKG may not detect it. Your doctor may order other tests for atrial fibrillation and to assess heart function; these may include a Holter monitor or echocardiogram (an ultrasound of the heart).

**Treatment**

There are two specific goals when treating atrial fibrillation and flutter.

One goal is to prevent clots from forming. Anticoagulants such as Coumadin™, commonly called blood thinners, are effective at preventing clots.

Another goal is to control heart rate and rhythm. Medications may be prescribed for this, or catheter ablation may be considered.

Cardiac catheter ablation is a procedure sometimes used to correct atrial fibrillation and flutter. A relatively non-invasive procedure, ablation involves inserting a catheter—which is a narrow, flexible wire—into a blood vessel in the groin and winding the wire up into the heart.

Once the catheter reaches the heart,

electrodes at the tip of the catheter gather data and a variety of electrical measurements are made. The data pinpoints the spot in the heart that is causing the electrical malfunction and thus the a-fib or flutter. Following this “electrical mapping,” the electrophysiologist cauterizes the heart tissue that is causing the malfunction, ending the disturbance of electrical flow through the heart and restoring a healthy heart rhythm.

Treating atrial fibrillation helps you avoid potential risks to your health. A number of treatment options are available to help you and your doctor manage your condition. Ask your doctor or nurse about the best treatment.



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