

Atrial fibrillation: diagnosis and management

Information for the public

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Atrial fibrillation: the care you should expect

Atrial fibrillation means the heart is beating in an irregular way, and usually too fast. This happens when there is a problem with the electrical signals inside the heart. Atrial fibrillation is fairly common, especially as people get older. It can cause breathlessness, palpitations and other symptoms, but it might not show itself at all – about a third of people with atrial fibrillation do not know they have it. The symptoms can also come and go, which makes atrial fibrillation hard to spot. It is important to find out if someone has atrial fibrillation and treat it because it means their heart is not working as well as it should. This can put them at risk of a stroke. However, treatment can prevent most strokes.

We want this guideline to make a difference to people with atrial fibrillation by making sure:

- people with atrial fibrillation get a faster and more accurate diagnosis
- the best tests and assessments are used to decide the right way to manage it
- people can always take part equally in decisions about their treatment
- people likely to have strokes are given preventative treatment
- people see a specialist quickly if their first treatment does not help.

Making decisions together

Decisions about treatment and care are best when they are made together. Your healthcare professionals should give you clear information, talk with you about your options and listen carefully to your views and concerns.

To help you make decisions, think about:

- What matters most to you – what do you want to get out of your treatment?
- What are you most worried about – are there risks or downsides to treatments for atrial fibrillation that worry you more than others?
- How will the treatment affect your day-to-day life?
- What happens if you do not want to have treatment?

If you can't understand the information you are given, tell your healthcare professional.

Read more about [making decisions about your care](#).

Where can I find out more?

The [NHS website](#) has more information about atrial fibrillation.

The organisations below can give you more advice and support.

- [British Heart Foundation](#), 0300 330 3311
- [Atrial Fibrillation Association](#), 01789 867 502
- [Stroke Association](#), 0303 3033 100
- [Thrombosis UK](#)

NICE is not responsible for the content of these websites.

To share an experience of care you have received, contact your local [Healthwatch](#).

We wrote this guideline with people who have been affected by atrial fibrillation and staff who treat and support them. All the decisions are based on the best research available.

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