

# Atrial

# Fibrillation

Reducing your risk of stroke

[stroke.org.uk](https://stroke.org.uk)

**Stroke**  
Association



# What is AF?

**Atrial Fibrillation (AF) is the most common type of irregular heartbeat.** Over 1 million people in the UK are living with the condition, and it's more common as we get older. AF means your heart is not working as well as it could and it may increase your risk of stroke by up to five times.

Your heart is a muscle and its job is to pump blood around your body. A normal pulse, when you're resting, is regular and between 60 to 100 beats per minute. If you have AF your heart beats in an irregular way or sometimes up to 140 times a minute.

AF is a manageable condition. If you have AF, it is important to talk to your GP to find out what simple measures may be needed to reduce your risk of stroke and help control the condition. Diagnosing and treating AF is vital as strokes due to AF are often more severe, but your risk can be reduced through proper medical treatment.

## Example of AF heartbeat

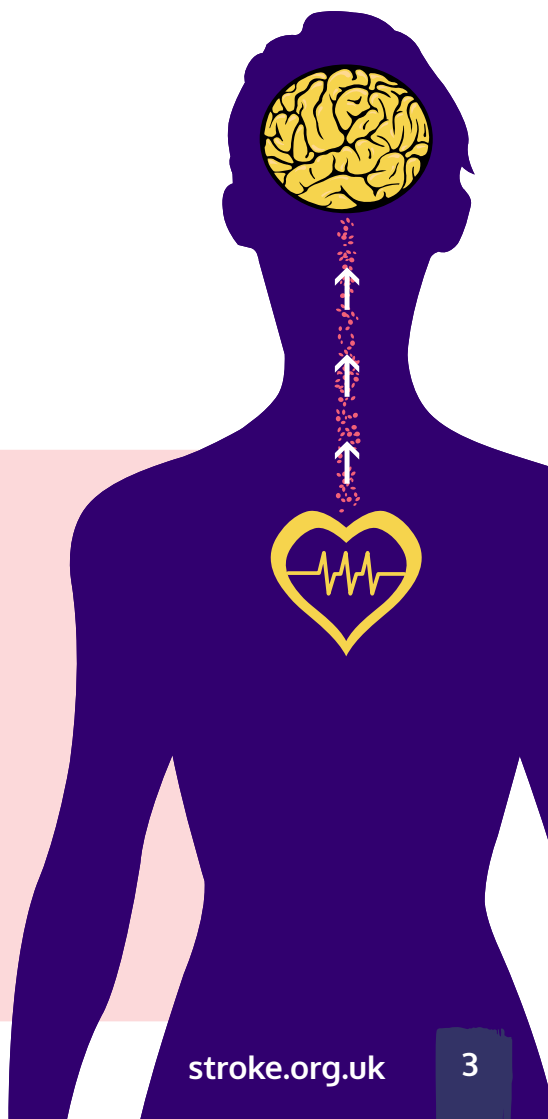


# How is AF linked to stroke?

**A stroke happens when the blood supply to part of the brain is cut off.**

This could be caused by either a blockage in an artery (ischaemic stroke) or by bleeding in the brain (haemorrhagic stroke). A transient ischaemic attack (TIA) or mini-stroke is similar to a stroke, but the symptoms are temporary and last no longer than 24 hours.

If you have an irregular heartbeat, your heart may not have a chance to empty itself of blood properly before filling up again. As a result, the blood does not move quickly and smoothly, and can form clots inside the heart. If these clots then travel in the bloodstream towards the brain, they could block the blood flow to your brain and cause a stroke or TIA.





# How do I know if I have AF?

**AF often goes undiagnosed.** It is estimated there could be another half a million people in the UK with undiagnosed AF.

**The following symptoms could be a sign that you have AF:**

- palpitations (being aware of your heart beating fast)
- breathlessness
- chest pain
- fatigue
- no symptoms but an irregular pulse over one minute.

If you think you have any of these symptoms, you should see your doctor as soon as possible. To find out if you have AF, a doctor or nurse will check your pulse. If it feels irregular, they may refer you for more tests to check whether you have AF.

# Treating AF to reduce stroke risk

**If you have AF, your doctor will look to treat both the condition and your stroke risk.** They will assess your stroke risk through a simple calculation. AF strokes can be prevented with the correct treatment.

The main treatment to reduce your stroke risk is blood-thinning medication (anticoagulants).

## **Anticoagulants**

There are a range of blood-thinning medications that can be used to reduce your risk of stroke, such as warfarin. A number of new anticoagulants have also been approved by NICE (National Institute for Clinical Excellence). These medications make your blood less likely to clot. These medications are not suitable for everyone and so it is important that you discuss all options with your GP, to make sure you receive the best treatment possible to

reduce your risk of stroke. Other blood-thinning medications belong to a group called antiplatelets. Being treated just with aspirin (aspirin monotherapy) is no longer recommended to reduce your risk of stroke.

**For more information on treatment, please see our factsheet F26 Atrial fibrillation and stroke.**

# What else can I do?

If you're diagnosed with AF you should discuss the treatment options with your doctor. By making some simple changes to your lifestyle, you can lower your risk of having a stroke further:



stop smoking



avoid drinking heavily



eat a healthy diet



take regular exercise



have regular check-ups with your GP, as the risk of stroke increases with age



manage any other medical conditions you have, like high cholesterol, diabetes or high blood pressure.

You should get your blood pressure checked at least once a year. You can get this done at your local GP practice, in some local pharmacies and at one of our free Know Your Blood Pressure events happening across the UK all year round.

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To find an event near you, visit [stroke.org.uk/kybp](https://stroke.org.uk/kybp)

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# Where can I find out more?

## **Stroke Association**

**Tel:** 0303 3033 100

**Website:** [stroke.org.uk/AF](http://stroke.org.uk/AF)

## **Atrial Fibrillation Association**

**Tel:** 01789 451 837

**Website:** [atrialfibrillation.org.uk](http://atrialfibrillation.org.uk)

## **British Heart Foundation**

**Tel:** 0300 330 3311

**Website:** [bhf.org.uk](http://bhf.org.uk)

## **Arrhythmia Alliance**

**Tel:** : 01789 450 787 (24 hours)

**Website:** [heartrhythmcharity.org.uk](http://heartrhythmcharity.org.uk)

For further information about AF and reducing your risk of stroke, you can order our more detailed factsheet **F26 Atrial fibrillation and stroke.**

**When stroke strikes, part of your brain shuts down.** And so does a part of you. Life changes instantly and recovery is tough. But the brain can adapt. Our specialist support, research and campaigning are only possible with the courage and determination of the stroke community. With more donations and support from you, we can rebuild even more lives.

Donate or find out more at **stroke.org.uk**

## Contact us

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We're here for you. If you'd like to know more please get in touch.

Stroke Helpline: **0303 3033 100**

From a textphone: **18001 0303 3033 100**

Email: **helpline@stroke.org.uk**

Website: **stroke.org.uk**

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Rebuilding lives after stroke

**Stroke**  
Association

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