Atrial fibrillation
What you need to know
What is atrial fibrillation?

Atrial fibrillation, or AF, is the most common form of irregular heartbeat. It may be a sign that a person's heart is not pumping as well as it should. As a result, blood clots are more likely to form in their heart, increasing their risk of having a stroke by five times.

Currently, over one million people are living with AF in the UK, but almost half are not receiving the most appropriate treatment.

Please read on to find out how you can manage AF in your community and identify patients affected by the condition.

If a person has AF, the upper chambers of their heart contract and relax in an uncoordinated and irregular way due to abnormal electrical activity.

An irregular and fast heartbeat can result in the heart not emptying itself of blood properly, increasing the risk of blood clots forming.

Blood clots can travel from the heart and block one of the arteries leading to the brain, potentially causing a stroke.
How to identify people with AF every 10 years after they turn 55.

The most common symptoms of AF are palpitations, breathlessness, chest pain and fatigue. However, some people do not have any symptoms, and AF is often only diagnosed during a general medical check-up.

This is why we need you to regularly pulse check high-risk patient groups, as well as people who display the common symptoms mentioned above.

This is something that you could easily do alongside a blood pressure check, or at the same time when using a manual blood pressure monitor.

You may also have other opportunities to undertake pulse checks, for example, during NHS health checks or flu clinics.

If your patient presents with confirmed AF, please follow the pathway attached.
To reduce the risk of AF-related stroke, you should discuss with your patients the most appropriate treatment option.

If anticoagulation is appropriate, there are several treatments available, including apixaban, dabigatran, rivaroxaban or a vitamin K antagonist such as warfarin, as recommended by NICE.

It’s also vital that people with AF are educated about how important it is that they comply with their recommended anticoagulation treatment to prevent them having a stroke.

We also recommend that people with AF who are receiving anticoagulation therapy should be regularly reviewed to assess their ongoing need for anticoagulation, their level of compliance and the quality of their current treatment.

At a minimum, each patient should be reviewed at least annually, or more frequently if clinically relevant events occur which might influence the effectiveness of their medication or their bleeding risk.

Visit stroke.org.uk/af for more information about AF and stroke, and to hear from people affected by the condition and professionals who have treated it.
Preventing stroke in people with AF

If one of your patients has an irregular heartbeat, please work through this pathway with them.

**Adult with atrial fibrillation**

- Assess stroke risk using CHA2DS2-VASc
- Assess bleeding risk using HAS-BLED tool

Provide a personalised package of care and information to prevent stroke

**Anticoagulation**

- Decide on best anticoagulation treatment
- Assess the anticoagulation control with vitamin K antagonists
- Review the anticoagulation

**No anticoagulation**

- Left atrial appendage occlusion
- Review the stroke and bleeding risks

- Control heart rate and rhythm

If you don’t want to keep the entirety of this leaflet, please detach your AF conversational tool and place it somewhere you can see it or in a safe place.

(Preventing stroke in people with atrial fibrillation, NICE 2015)
We are the Stroke Association

We believe in life after stroke. That’s why we support stroke survivors to make the best recovery they can. It’s why we campaign for better stroke care. And it’s why we fund research into finding new treatments and ways of preventing stroke.

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

Stroke Helpline: 0303 3033 100
Website: stroke.org.uk
Email: info@stroke.org.uk
From a textphone: 18001 0303 3033 100

Together we can conquer stroke