Stroke
association

Atrial fibrillation
What you need to know

What is atrial fibrillation?

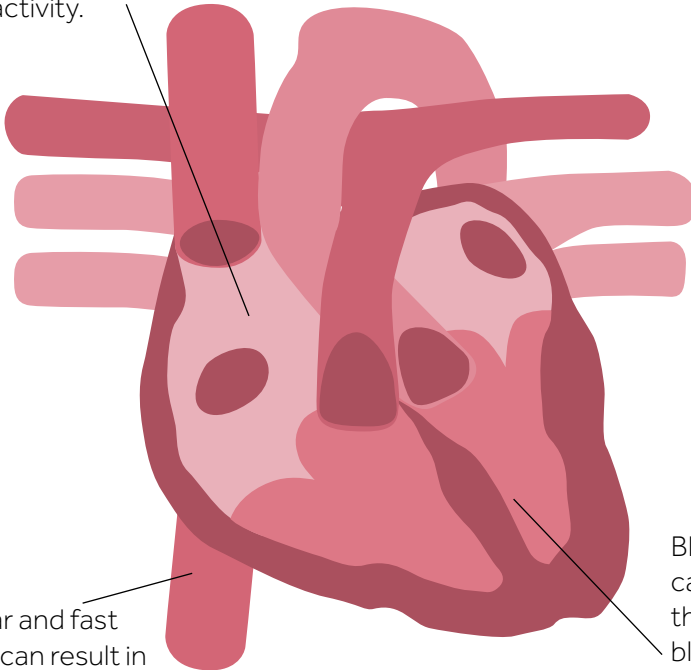Atrial fibrillation, or AF, is the most common form of irregular heartbeat.

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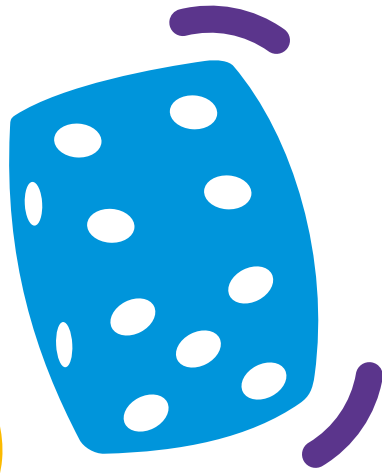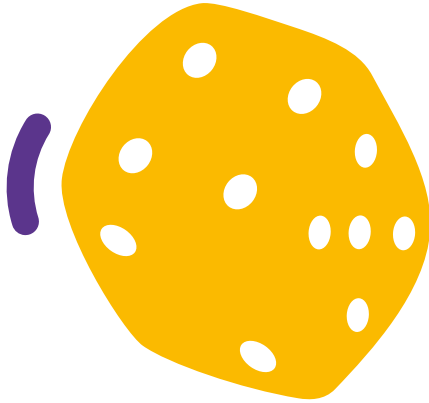
Please read on to find out how you can manage AF in your community and identify patients affected by the condition.

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.

The risk of a person having AF approximately

DOUBLES

every 10 years after they turn 55.

How to identify people with AF

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.

Appropriate anticoagulation of all patients with recognised AF would prevent at least

4,500 strokes

& 3,000 DEATHS a year

How to manage AF to prevent stroke

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 is important that all available treatment options are considered, and a decision made between the patient and doctor based on the patient's individual needs and preferences.

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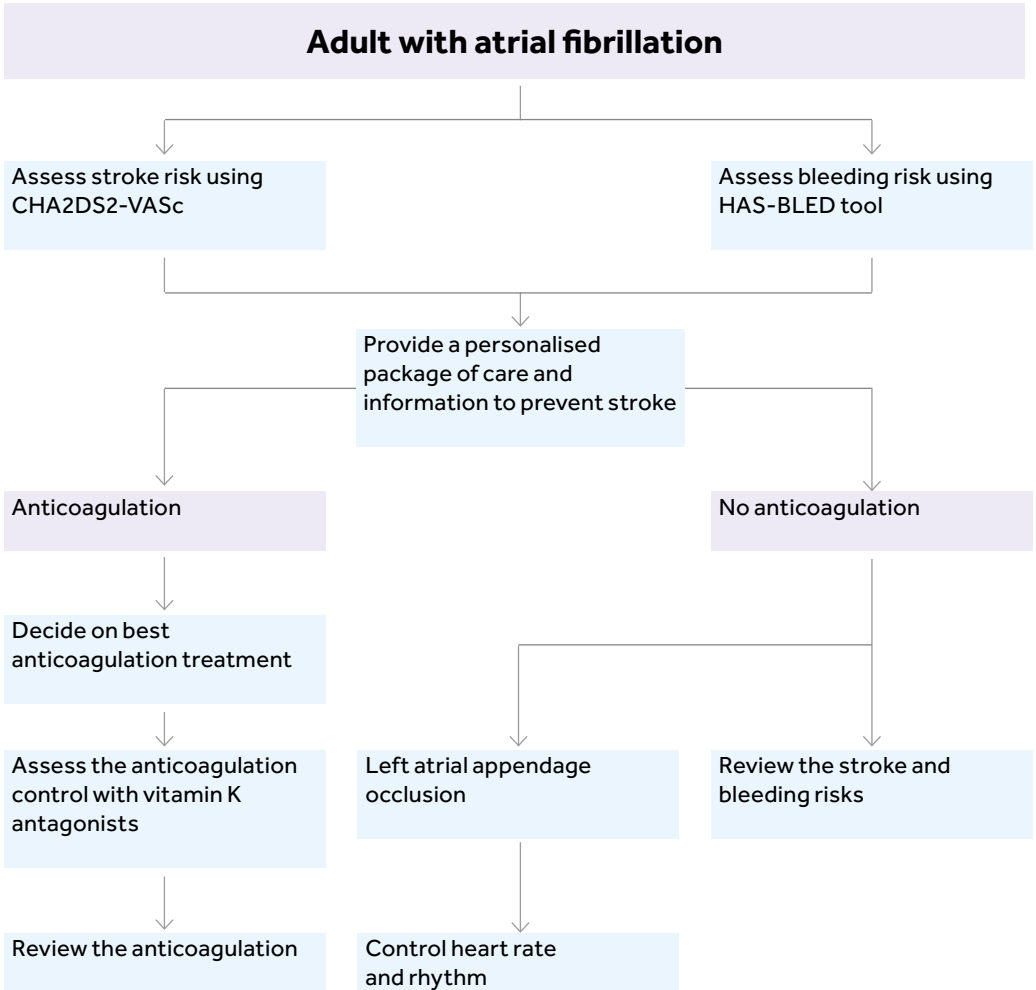
We also recommend that people with AF who are receiving anticoagulation therapy should be regularly reviewed to assess their ongoing need for anticoagulation, their level of compliance and the quality of their current treatment.

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

No anticoagulation

Decide on best anticoagulation treatment

Assess the anticoagulation control with vitamin K antagonists

Left atrial appendage occlusion

Review the stroke and bleeding risks

Review the anticoagulation

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)

Stroke

association

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

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