

# What is Atrial Fibrillation?

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Patient Information



# Atrial Fibrillation

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## What is Atrial Fibrillation?

Atrial fibrillation is a heart rhythm disorder in which the smaller chambers (atria) of the heart contract too fast and irregularly when abnormal electrical impulses suddenly start firing in the atria. This reduces the heart's efficiency and performance.

Atrial fibrillation is the most common heart rhythm disturbance and can affect people of any age, but it is more common in older people. More men than women have atrial fibrillation.



## Types of Atrial Fibrillation

The type is determined by how frequent the episodes of atrial fibrillation are and how long they last:

### PAROXYSMAL ATRIAL FIBRILLATION

Atrial fibrillation that terminates spontaneously or with intervention within 7 days of onset

### PERSISTENT ATRIAL FIBRILLATION

Continuous atrial fibrillation that is sustained beyond 7 days

### PERMANENT ATRIAL FIBRILLATION

Atrial fibrillation in which the presence of the atrial fibrillation is accepted by the patient and physician, and no further attempts will be made to either restore or maintain sinus rhythm

Atrial fibrillation is a progressive arrhythmia which becomes harder to treat over time with more frequent episodes occurring.

# Atrial Fibrillation

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## What causes Atrial Fibrillation?

The cause of atrial fibrillation is not fully understood. Atrial fibrillation is more likely to occur in people with conditions such as high blood pressure, obesity, sleep apnoea syndrome (stopping breathing during sleeping) and narrowing of the coronary arteries. It can be triggered in certain situations such as drinking too much alcohol or smoking.

Your doctor may wish to conduct examinations such as an echo, a CT or MRI scan of your heart, a sleep study or blood tests which may be able to detect the factors triggering the arrhythmia.



## What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of atrial fibrillation vary greatly and most often consist of a noticeably irregular, fast pulse and heart palpitations. Moreover, tiredness, dizziness or shortness of breath may also occur, as the heart pumps slightly less efficiently than with a regular and easy rhythm. However, there are also some people in which atrial fibrillation goes unnoticed.

## What treatments are available?

- Medication to control the heart rate or rhythm
- **Blood thinning medication** – people with atrial fibrillation are more at risk of having a stroke
- **Cardioversion** – where the heart is given an electric shock to restore the normal rhythm
- **Catheter ablation** – where the area inside the heart that is causing the abnormal rhythm is destroyed using radiofrequency or cryo energy

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### Patient Information:

1. What is an arrhythmia?
2. **What is Atrial Fibrillation?**
3. Preparing for my first arrhythmia consultation
4. What is an ablation procedure?
5. My hospital stay for an ablation procedure
6. My recovery after an ablation procedure

For more information related to Atrial Fibrillation, please visit  
**[GETSMARTABOUTAFIB.IE](https://www.getsmartaboutafib.ie)**



As with any medical treatment, individual results may vary. Only a Cardiologist or Electrophysiologist can determine whether ablation is an appropriate course of treatment. There are potential risks including bleeding, swelling or bruising at the catheter insertion site, and infection. More serious complications are rare, which can include damage to the heart or blood vessels; blood clots (which may lead to stroke); heart attack, or death. These risks need to be discussed with your doctor and recovery takes time.

The information featured here is not intended as medical advice, or to be used for medical diagnosis or treatment. Please talk to your doctor if you have any questions.

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