

ATRIAL FIBRILLATION

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What is it?

Atrial fibrillation is a disturbance of the normal regular heart rhythm, which is called sinus rhythm. It produces an irregular, often fast pulse and a feeling of palpitations. Normally the heart follows a beat or rhythm produced by a natural pacemaker in a collecting chamber of the heart, the atrium. In atrial fibrillation the natural rhythm is disturbed and taken over by a fast and irregular beat. The effectiveness of the heart muscle is a little reduced in atrial fibrillation because the atrium no longer contracts effectively.

What causes it?

It can be caused by conditions which affect the collecting chamber of the heart, such as a leaky valves or by conditions which affect the heart muscle like angina, heart attacks or high blood pressure. Rarely it is associated with weakness of the heart muscle. Occasionally it is seen as a transient problem in people under stress for another reason such as with fevers, thyroid problems or after anaesthetics.

It can also occur in people who have no other heart problem and may run in families.

What are the risks?

When atrial fibrillation initially occurs the heart rate is often too fast. This can produce shortness of breath, reduced energy levels and sometimes dizziness, but after a while, and with treatment, your system will adjust to it and you will probably be unaware of it. Later on the main problem is an increased tendency to blood clot formation in the atrium which failing to contract does not empty itself of blood effectively. This can allow blood which is stagnant to congeal and form clots which can travel to cause strokes.

How do you treat it?

If the heart rate is too fast the initially treatment is to slow it down with tablets such as Digoxin (Lanoxin), Sotalol (Sotacor) or Amiodarone (Atacard, Cordarone, Aratax). If appropriate, consideration is then given to thinning the blood with Warfarin to prevent blood clot formation. Where possible it is desirable to try and restore normal rhythm. This can sometimes be achieved with tablets such as those listed above and Flecainide (Tambocor), but may require a slight electric shock to be delivered while you are asleep under an anaesthetic (Cardioversion). Atrial fibrillation is common and generally very benign.