Atrial Fibrillation (Afib)
What You and Your Family Should Know
Getting Started

This guide will give you tips for how you can manage your atrial fibrillation (Afib), feel better, and keep from having a stroke.

When you have Afib, taking care of yourself is important. You have a team of health care professionals who can help. The team may include:

- Doctors (including your primary care doctor, cardiologists, and other specialists)
- Nurse practitioners
- Physician assistants
- Pharmacists
- Nurses
- Medical assistants
- Social workers
- Other health care professionals
- **YOU are the most important part of the team! YOU are the expert in your own care.**

Use this guide to get the knowledge and skills you need to take charge of your Afib. Share this guide with your family and friends so they can learn, too, and help you manage your Afib.

You can take this one step at a time. Just START!
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Information About Afib

What Is Atrial Fibrillation (Afib)?
What Are the Symptoms of Afib?
What Are the Causes of Afib?
How Will I Know if I Have Afib?
Atrial fibrillation (pronounced: A-tre-al fi-bri-LA-shun), or Afib, is a type of irregular heartbeat. Afib is caused by a problem in the upper parts of the heart, called the atria. When the atria don’t beat regularly, blood may not flow correctly and the heart may beat faster.

Afib increases the chance of blood clots forming and moving to other parts of the body, such as the brain. Blood clots in the brain can cause a stroke.

⚠️ **Stroke is one of the most serious risks for people with Afib.**
What Are the Symptoms of Afib?

Symptoms of Afib can affect your everyday life but are controllable. These are some of the symptoms you may have:

- A pounding, fluttering, or irregular feeling in the chest
- Heart feels like it is beating very fast or racing
- Shortness of breath
- Dizziness
- Weakness or feeling tired
- A sensation of not feeling right
- Feeling like you might pass out

You may not have any symptoms at all with Afib. Some people can have symptoms all the time. Afib may come and go and last for just a few minutes or hours. This means that some days you can feel normal; other days you may have symptoms.

⚠️ **Whether you notice symptoms or not, your Afib may still need treatment!**
What Are the Causes of Afib?

Afib is most often caused by damage to the heart. Problems like uncontrolled high blood pressure, heart failure, and coronary artery disease can cause Afib. Sometimes the cause of Afib is unknown.

Other Factors That Can Contribute to Afib

- **Open-Heart Surgery**—Patients can get Afib after open-heart surgery.
- **Stroke**—Many people who have had strokes experience Afib.
- **Alcohol**—People are more likely to develop Afib if they are heavy drinkers.
- **Being Overweight**—Overweight and adults with obesity are more likely to develop Afib than others.
- **Age**—Most people with Afib are between 65 and 85 years old.

How Will I Know if I Have Afib?

Afib may be found during a checkup with your health care professional. You may have a test to see if you have Afib. This test, called an EKG, is painless and records your heartbeat.
My Checklist: Understanding Afib

☐ I will read the Afib guide so that I can better understand my symptoms.
☐ I will keep track of my symptoms so that I can better manage my Afib.
☐ I will put together a list of questions I may have for my doctor or other health care professionals.
☐ I will reach out to members of my health care team when I have concerns.
☐ I know who to contact for questions and concerns. Their phone number is: ________________________________
☐ I will ask my family members and friends to read the Afib guide so they can help me take care of myself.

☐ _______________________________________
☐ _______________________________________

I Can Do It!
Risks Associated With Afib

Problems Due to Afib

What Is Stroke?

Warning Signs of Stroke

Afib and Your Risk for Stroke
Problems Due to Afib

If left untreated, Afib can lead to:

- **Stroke**: Blood clots may form in the heart and can travel to the brain. All strokes are bad, but strokes due to Afib can cause more serious problems than strokes from other causes. They can also be fatal.

- **Heart Failure (weakened heart)**: Heart muscles can become weak if the heart has been pumping fast for a long time.
What Is Stroke?

A stroke is a "brain attack." It happens when the brain does not have enough blood supply and oxygen and brain cells start to die. This can be caused by blood clots that travel to the brain and block blood flow.

Warning Signs of Stroke

It is important to know the warning signs and symptoms of stroke. If you notice any of these symptoms, call 911 right away:

- Numbness or weakness, especially on one side of the body
- Drooping on one side of the face
- Trouble speaking, slurred speech, and confusion
- Trouble seeing in one or both eyes
- Dizziness, trouble walking, trouble with balance
- Severe headache
**Stroke and Warning Signs**

**F.A.S.T.** is an easy way for you or your family to remember the sudden signs of a stroke.

**Face Drooping**
Does one side of the face droop or is it numb? Ask the person to smile.

**Arm Weakness**
Is one arm weak or numb? Ask the person to raise both arms. Does one arm drift downward?

**Speech Difficulty**
Is speech slurred, are they unable to speak, or are they hard to understand? Ask the person to repeat a simple sentence, like “the sky is blue.” Is the sentence repeated correctly?

**Time to Call 9-1-1**
If the person shows any of these symptoms, even if the symptoms go away, call 9-1-1 and get them to the hospital immediately.
Afib and Your Risk for Stroke

Different factors could increase your risk for stroke from Afib. You are at higher risk for stroke if you have Afib AND:

- Have heart failure (weakened heart)
- Have high blood pressure
- Are age 65 years or older
- Have diabetes
- Had a prior stroke or mini-stroke
- Have vascular disease, such as a blockage in a leg artery that causes pain when walking
- A history of heart attacks

⚠️ The more risk factors you have, the greater your stroke risk.

Some of these risk factors, like age, can’t be changed. But you can lower your risk for stroke by controlling high blood pressure and diabetes. Strokes from Afib are very serious. The good news is that most strokes can be prevented by following your treatment plan.

Talk to your health care professional about how to reduce your risk for stroke.

"I have high blood pressure and Afib. My doctor helped me understand why I am at a higher risk for stroke."
My Checklist: Knowing My Risks

- I will talk to my health care professional about ways I can reduce my risk for stroke.
- I will learn the warning signs for stroke and remember F.A.S.T.– (Face drooping, Arm weakness, Slurring speech, Time to call 911).
- I will put the “F.A.S.T.” page from the back of the Afib guide on my refrigerator.
- I will tell my family members and friends about what “FAST” means.

I Can Do It!
Medicines for Afib

Afib Medicines

Medicines and Treatments for Heart Rate and Rhythm

Taking Your Medicines
Afib Medicines

There are several different types of medicines that may be helpful for Afib. These include:

- Medicines to prevent blood clots and reduce your risk for stroke.
- Medicines to control how fast your heart beats.
- Medicines to keep your heart beating regularly.

Talk with your health care professional about which medicines are right for you and which ones to avoid. Your health care team knows about the medicines, but you are an expert in YOU!
Blood Thinners: Risks and Benefits

Blood thinners are medicines that help to prevent blood clots. By preventing blood clots, blood thinners can reduce stroke risk. However, they also increase the risk for bleeding. Some bleeding may be minor. But, it can also be serious and cause you to need emergency care.

There can be risks or side effects when taking medicines to prevent blood clots. However, these can usually be managed. Talk to your health care professional about choosing the right medicines for you.
Warfarin (Blood Thinner)

Warfarin (Coumadin®) is a blood thinner that needs to be adjusted from time to time. If you are on warfarin, you will need regular blood tests to make sure you are on the right dose. You will have lower risk for stroke and bleeding if your blood is within the right range.

Blood Tests

Too little warfarin in your body increases your risk for stroke. Too much increases your risk for bleeding. Warfarin requires you to have regular blood tests. This test is called an INR test.

My health care professional told me my INR range is ________________
(for example, 2.0-3.0).

Talk with your health care professional about how often your blood needs to be tested if you are taking warfarin.
Some foods can interact with warfarin. Vitamin K can affect how your medicine works. Vitamin K is found in green vegetables. You can and should eat these foods. But, it is very important to eat the same amount and type of food every week. Talk to your health care professional before making changes to your diet.

**Some foods that are high in vitamin K are:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kale</th>
<th>Lettuce</th>
<th>Spinach</th>
<th>Brussels Sprouts</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parsley</td>
<td>Collard greens</td>
<td>Mustard greens</td>
<td>Chard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broccoli</td>
<td>Cabbage</td>
<td>Asparagus</td>
<td>Soybeans</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Other Blood Thinners

Apixaban (Eliquis®); Dabigatran (Pradaxa®); Edoxaban (Savaysa®); Rivaroxaban (Xarelto®)

There are other blood thinners available besides warfarin. These medicines have pros and cons. These blood thinners:

- Require fewer blood tests
- Cause fewer bleeding issues
- Don’t interact with vitamin K in foods
- May cost more depending on your insurance benefits

Talk to your health care professional about which blood thinner is right for you.

Afib patients with chronic kidney disease may need to be on a special dose of blood thinners. Talk with your health care professional if you have kidney disease.
Other Prescription and Over-the-Counter Medicines

All medicines have the potential to interact. Check with your pharmacist before taking any new medicines. Read all labels to check if they include certain ingredients.

**Ingredients to avoid:**

- Ginseng (found in teas and supplements)
- Ma huang (found in teas and supplements)
- Pseudoephedrine (found in over-the-counter cold or allergy medicines, such as Tylenol Cold® and Sudafed®)
- Ibuprofen or naproxen (found in Advil®, Motrin®, or Aleve®)

⚠️ Do not take aspirin or baby aspirin unless prescribed by your health care professional. Aspirin can increase your bleeding risk.
Medicines and Treatments for Heart Rate and Rhythm

Some people with Afib may need to take medicines or have procedures to control heart rate and rhythm.

- Heart rate medicines control how fast your heart beats.
- Heart rhythm medicines keep your heart beating regularly.
- Heart procedures can help control abnormal heart rate and rhythm.
- A common procedure for Afib is called “ablation.” This can help return the heart rate to normal. It may only be right for some people with Afib.
- Other procedures can be minor surgeries or open-heart surgery.

Talk with your health care professional to decide what is best for you.
Taking Your A fib Medicines

Take all medicines as directed on the bottle and by your health care professional. **If you don’t take your medicines, your chance of having a stroke is greater.** Do not stop taking any of your medicines unless you have talked to your health care professional.

The following tips can help remind you to take your medicines when you need to.

- Put your medicine in the same, easy-to-find place and take at the same time every day. Keep medicines in a safe and dry location and out of reach of children and pets.

- Pill organizers can help you keep track of medicines and stay on a daily schedule. You can get these at the pharmacy. (Note: Dabigatran needs to be kept in a bottle and not a pill organizer).

- Never skip a dose. If you do, don’t double your next dose. Instead, take your next dose as directed.

⚠️ **Missing doses of A fib medicines could lead to stroke.**
Stay Safe! Tips for Taking Medicines

Side effects or cost may cause you to want to stop taking your medicines. Stopping your medicines can lead to stroke. **Don’t stop taking your medicines unless you’ve talked to your health care professional.** They can help you choose a treatment plan that works for you.

Other tips for safely taking your medicines are:

- Store your medicine as directed.
- Some medicines should be taken with a meal. This is to prevent upset stomach or improve how the medicine works.

If you are having trouble paying for your medicines, talk to your pharmacist or other health care professional. There may be ways they can help.
Keeping a Medicine List

It is important to keep a list of your current medicines and their dosages (both prescription and over-the-counter). **Use the medicine log on pages 45 and 46, and make copies for future use.**

- Keep a copy of your list of medicines, dose, and schedule in your wallet or purse.
- Bring this list to every doctor visit.
- Update it with every change.
- Note the reason you take each medicine.
- If you are unsure about why you are taking a certain medicine, talk to your health care professional.
- Your health care professional can help you keep your list updated.
- If you have access to your medicine list through a patient portal, make sure it is up to date.
- Talk to your pharmacist about what to do with medicines you are no longer taking.
My Checklist: Afib Medicines

☐ I will set an alarm to take my medicines at the same time every day.
☐ I will not stop taking my medicines, especially my blood thinner, without talking to my health care team.
☐ I will have my blood tested ________________ (how often?).
☐ I will keep an updated list of my medicines. I will bring it with me to all health care appointments.
☐ I will keep track of the vitamin K-rich foods I eat (if I am on warfarin).
☐ I will use a pill organizer to sort my medicines, when possible.
☐ I will properly store my medicines.
☐ I will set a reminder for refilling my prescriptions. I will talk to my pharmacist about ways to make sure I always get medicine refills.
☐ I will try to fill my prescriptions a few days early, so I never run out of my medicines.
☐ I will ask my pharmacist for help if I am confused about my medicines.
☐ I will talk with my health care professional if I have any side effects.
☐ ________________________________
☐ ________________________________

I Can Do It!
What You Can Do to Manage Your Afib

Staying Safe: What to Do About Bleeding

Monitoring Your Heart Rate
Bleeding: How to Stay Safe

If you are on a blood thinner, you have a higher risk for bleeding. Bleeding can be minor or serious.

Minor bleeding is sometimes called nuisance bleeding. This is not an emergency but you should discuss it with your health care professional. **Some examples of minor bleeding are:**

- Some blood when brushing your teeth
- Nosebleeds
- Minor cuts from shaving that may bleed for longer than normal
- Small amounts of blood on toilet tissue

**If you have any of the following serious bleeding, seek emergency treatment right away:**

- Blood in your stool
- Throwing up blood
- Severe headache
- A fall or accident

Talk to your health care professional about what kind of bleeding is serious and what to do when it happens.
Tips to Prevent Bleeding

- Do a safety check in your home. Remove any risks for falling, bruising, or getting cut.
- Wear safety gear when necessary, like a helmet when riding a bike.
- Use a soft toothbrush. Be gentle when brushing your teeth.
- Always wear shoes to avoid cuts or scrapes on your feet.
- Avoid aspirin and arthritis drugs like ibuprofen and naproxen, unless they are prescribed to you.
- Don’t be afraid to ask for help!

**Do not stop your blood thinners if you have minor bleeding.** It is important to keep taking your blood thinners to prevent clots and stroke.

If you are going to have a small procedure, you may need to stop taking your blood thinners a few days before. Talk with your health care professional before any medical procedures. Share any concerns you have about your treatment plan.
A good heart rate is between 80 and 110 beats per minute. In Afib, the heart rate can be much higher. Your health care professional may ask you to monitor and record your heart rate at home. By keeping a record of your heart rate, your health care team can see what is normal for you. It may also help you track any episodes of Afib.

To check your heart rate:

- Place the tip of your index and middle fingers on your opposite wrist below the base of the thumb.
- Count the number of beats you feel in 30 seconds.
- Multiply the number of beats by 2. This is your heart rate.

Some smartphones and smartwatches can be used to monitor your heart rate. You can also use the readout from a blood pressure monitor. Blood pressure monitors are small machines that can be purchased at a local pharmacy. Talk to your pharmacist about getting one and how to use it.

Have your family, friend, or caregiver learn how to take your heart rate.

My usual heart rate when I am at rest is___________________________.

My usual heart rate when I am exercising is_________________________.

My usual heart rate when I am sleeping is___________________________.
My Checklist: Managing My Afib

☐ I will keep my home safe and avoid any risks for bleeding when possible.

☐ I will make note of any bleeding episodes and discuss them with my health care professional.

☐ I will keep emergency phone numbers with me.

☐ I will inform my family and friends of warning signs and symptoms of stroke so they will know when I may need emergency care and what to do.

☐ I will monitor and record my heart rate. I will bring my numbers to my health care appointments.

☐ ____________________________________________________________

☐ ____________________________________________________________

I Can Do It!
Living Healthy With Afib

Eating Right With Afib

Exercising With Afib
Eating a healthy diet is one of the most important ways to protect your heart and stay healthy.

**To eat healthy:**

- Eat smaller portions.
- Make foods in a healthy way. Try to prepare foods by grilling, steaming, or baking instead of frying or cooking in oil.
- Stay away from fatty and salty foods when you can.

Eat more fruits and vegetables. Fruits and vegetables give you lots of nutrition without a lot of calories. Fill at least half of your plate with them. They also make great snacks.

**The Healthy Plate**

Think of your plate as different sections. One half is for vegetables, and the other half is for proteins (like meat, fish, beans) and carbohydrates (like breads, pasta, potatoes).
Caffeine

Caffeine is a stimulant that can cause your Afib to go out of control.

Caffeine can be found in:
- Coffee and tea
- Colas and other soft drinks
- Chocolate
- “Energy” drinks

Alcohol

Alcohol can increase your risk for an Afib episode.

1 drink a day for women and 2 drinks for men is usually considered healthy.

⚠️ Ask your health care professional about whether it is safe for you to have caffeine or alcohol.
Exercising With Afib

Exercise is an important part of a healthy lifestyle.

Most people with Afib should exercise. Ask your health care professional how you can safely exercise. Once you get started, you may feel better.

You might be surprised that some of the things you do every day are exercise. If you pick something you like, you will be more likely to stick with it.

Examples of good activities include:

- Walking
- Riding a stationary bike
- Swimming
- Yoga or stretching
- Golf
- Dancing

Stop Smoking

Quitting smoking is important for your overall health and important for managing Afib. Talk to your health care professional about ways to quit smoking.
My Checklist: Living Healthy

☐ I will keep healthy snacks on hand, like carrot sticks, low-fat yogurt, unbuttered popcorn, or unsalted nuts.

☐ I will check with my health care professional about drinking alcoholic beverages.

☐ I will check for caffeine in foods or drinks.

☐ I will make a commitment not to smoke.

☐ I will take a short walk every day.

☐ I will avoid sitting for too long. I will get up and do small chores during TV commercials.

☐ I will schedule checkups and immunizations.

☐ 

☐ 

I Can Do It!
Hospitalization

Hospitalization Due to Afib

Hospital Discharge Checklist
Symptoms of Afib can sometimes cause you to go to the hospital. People with Afib may also be in the hospital after surgery. There are steps you can take to make sure you stay safe in the hospital and when you return home.

**Staying Safe During Hospitalization**

- ✔ Have a family member or friend stay with you when you are in the hospital.
- ✔ Bring a complete list of medicines, including prescription, over-the-counter, and supplements. The list should include any medicines started during your hospital stay. Share this list with the hospital health care team.
- ✔ Check your hospital wristband to make sure your name and information are correct. Hospital staff should check this band each time they give you a new medicine, take a blood sample, or perform any tests.
- ✔ Protect yourself from infection. Make sure guests or anyone who touches you, including hospital staff, wash their hands.
- ✔ Ask friends and family not to visit if they have flu or cold-like symptoms.
- ✔ Don’t be afraid to speak up if you have questions or if you sense something isn’t right.
Hospitalization Checklist

✓ Ask questions if you don’t understand discharge instructions. It helps to have a family member or friend with you when your discharge information is explained.

✓ Explain your discharge instructions in your own words to your health care professional. This will help ensure you have a shared understanding of the plan.

✓ Ask for an updated list of your medicines, including any that were changed during your hospital stay. Share it with your health care team.

✓ Ask about what you can eat and what activities you can do.

✓ Ask what signs, symptoms, and side effects you should be looking out for. Ask when you should call 911 or when to call the doctor. (See page 44 to write down this information.)

Before you leave the hospital, it is important to schedule your follow-up doctor visits and blood tests! Usually, it is best to see your health care professional within 7 days of discharge.

If I have questions about discharge instructions, I should contact (name and phone number): ________________________________

My next appointment is (Primary Care Physician): __________________

My next appointment is (Cardiologist): _______________________

My next appointment is (Other): _____________________________

My next blood test is: ________________________________

When You Get Home

✓ Schedule any follow-up doctor visits and blood tests that were not set up in the hospital.

✓ Bring all your medicines to your next doctor’s visit.
  • Include new medicines.
  • Include any medicines that were stopped during your hospital stay.
  • Share your current medicine list with your pharmacist.

✓ Read your Afib booklet, and write down questions for your health care professional.

✓ Bring your Afib booklet to your next doctor’s visit.

If you have questions, SPEAK UP and ASK.
My Checklist: After Hospitalization

☐ I will follow my discharge instructions.
☐ I will schedule any follow-up doctor visits and blood tests that were not set up in the hospital.
☐ I will bring all my medicines (or a list) to my next doctor’s visit, including any new medicines that were started during my hospital stay.
☐ I will talk to my health care professional about any medicines that were stopped during my hospital stay.
☐ I will share my current medicine list with my pharmacist.
☐ I will read my Afib booklet and write down questions for my health care professional.
☐ I will bring my Afib booklet to my next doctor’s visit.
☐ I will SPEAK UP and ASK questions.

I Can Do It!
My Important Numbers

When to Get Help/My Important Numbers

My Medicine Log
When to Get Help

⚠️ Fill out this page with your health care professional. This will guide when you need to seek help for your Afib. You may only have 3 hours to get the best treatment if you are having a stroke.

Call 911 if you have the following:

- Afib Symptoms: ____________________________________________
- Stroke Symptoms: __________________________________________
- Heart Rate: ________________________________________________
- Bleeding Symptoms (serious): ________________________________

Call your health care professional immediately if you have the following symptoms: __________________________________________________________

Call your health care professional on the next business day if you have the following symptoms: __________________________________________

My important phone numbers are:

Primary Care Doctor: __________________________________________
Phone #: ______________________________________________________

Cardiologist: _________________________________________________
Phone #: _____________________________________________________

Pharmacy: ____________________________________________________
Phone #: _____________________________________________________

Other Health Care Professional: _________________________________
Phone #: _____________________________________________________
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Medicine</th>
<th>Dosage</th>
<th>Size, Shape, &amp; Color</th>
<th>How Much</th>
<th>When to Take/How to Use</th>
<th>What I Use It For</th>
<th>Start/Stop Date</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Example: Warfarin</td>
<td>5mg</td>
<td>small, oval, peach color</td>
<td>1 pill</td>
<td>Take by mouth, every morning</td>
<td>Afib</td>
<td>4/1/13-</td>
<td>Don’t skip doses, be consistent with green veggies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name of Medicine</td>
<td>Dosage</td>
<td>Size, Shape, &amp; Color</td>
<td>How Much</td>
<td>When to Take/How to Use</td>
<td>What I Use It For</td>
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<tr>
<td>Example: Vitamin C</td>
<td>500 mg big round, orange</td>
<td>1 pill</td>
<td>Take by mouth, every morning</td>
<td>Daily vitamin</td>
<td>2/5/12-</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
## My Blood Test Log

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Results (INR)</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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### My Lab Location and Information

Lab Name: __________________________________________________________
Address: __________________________________________________________
                                                                 __________
Phone Number: _____________________________________________________

My health care professional told me my INR range is _________________
(for example, 2.0-3.0)
# My Blood Test Log

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Results (INR)</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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## My Lab Location and Information

Lab Name: __________________________________________________________

Address: __________________________________________________________
         __________________________________________________________

Phone Number: ____________________________________________________

My health care professional told me my INR range is ________________
(for example, 2.0-3.0)
Acknowledgments

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F.A.S.T. is an easy way for you or your family to remember the sudden signs of a stroke.

Face Drooping
Does one side of the face droop or is it numb? Ask the person to smile.

Arm Weakness
Is one arm weak or numb? Ask the person to raise both arms. Does one arm drift downward?

Speech Difficulty
Is speech slurred, are they unable to speak, or are they hard to understand? Ask the person to repeat a simple sentence, like “the sky is blue.” Is the sentence repeated correctly?

Time to Call 9-1-1
If the person shows any of these symptoms, even if the symptoms go away, call 9–1–1 and get them to the hospital immediately.