



Atrial Fibrillation



heart rhythm services

Normally, the upper heart chambers (atria) beat first, about once every second, pushing blood into and “priming” the lower chambers (ventricles). The ventricles, which are thick and muscular and provide essentially all of the pumping action of the heart, then beat to push the blood to the body.

Atrial fibrillation (AF) causes the atria to quiver rapidly and irregularly. As a result, the atria don’t prime the ventricles, which causes them to also beat rapidly and irregularly. The lack of priming and the rapid, irregular beating makes the heart pump less effectively.

How common is atrial fibrillation?

AF is a very common abnormality of heart rhythm, affecting more than two million people in the United States.

Risk Factors

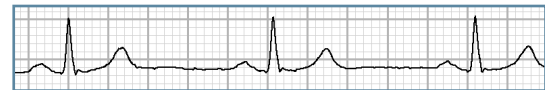
- High blood pressure
- Alcohol ingestion
- Excessive stimulants such as caffeine
- Lung disease, thyroid disease, nerve conditions or heart disease such as leaky valves, congestive heart failure, coronary artery disease, previous heart attack or inflammation near the heart.

Symptoms

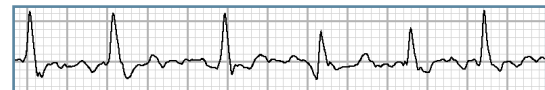
Although AF often occurs without any symptoms, it can cause palpitations (the sensation of abnormal heartbeats), fatigue, lack of stamina and shortness of breath. However, the main problem is stroke.

Diagnosis

AF can be detected through an electrocardiogram (EKG), which records electrical impulses generated by the heart. An event monitor or a Holter monitor can be worn over an extended period of time to detect AF as well.



EKG of a normal heart rhythm



EKG showing atrial fibrillation

Treatment

AF therapy is directed at reducing or eliminating the risk of stroke, symptoms and weakening of the heart from persistent rapid heart rate. Several therapies are used alone or in combination, including blood thinners, medications, pacemakers and implantable cardioverter defibrillators. Catheter ablation and minimally invasive surgical procedures are used to permanently cure AF.



In Affiliation with Sacred Heart Medical Center

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