

THE ABCs of AFIB



HERE'S WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT ATRIAL FIBRILLATION—AND HOW TO MANAGE YOUR RISK.

Your heart skips a beat, or races for an extended period of time, or even feels like it's fluttering. After one of these episodes, you feel drained and weak.

These symptoms could be a sign of atrial fibrillation (known as AFib), an abnormality in the rhythm of the heart that indicates your blood isn't moving well. Left untreated, AFib can lead to heart disease or stroke.

HOW DOES AFIB WORK?

"AFib and other types of abnormal heart rhythms—also called arrhythmias—are problems with the heart's 'electrical' system," explains Ghassan Chehade, MD, interventional cardiologist at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital Rahway. Simply put, healthy electrical signaling begins in the upper chamber of the heart, then travels to the heart's lower chamber and activates muscle contraction with each heartbeat. With AFib, that signal is disorganized and the contractions become uncoordinated.

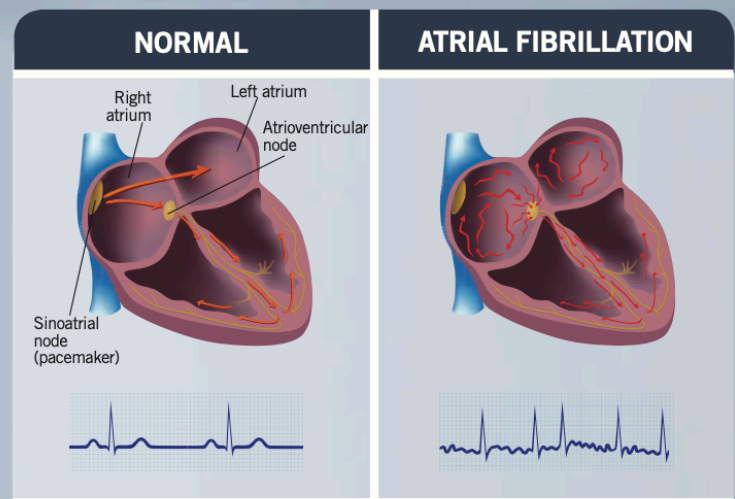


GHASSAN CHEHADE, MD

With AFib, that signal is disorganized and the contractions become uncoordinated.

HOW IS IT DIAGNOSED?

"Patients often walk around with AFib for years without knowing they have it," Dr. Chehade says. The condition can be detected via a routine electrocardiogram



THE CHARTS ABOVE SHOW ELECTRICAL ACTIVITY OF A NORMAL HEART, AT LEFT, AND A HEART WITH ATRIAL FIBRILLATION.

(EKG), or heard as an irregular heartbeat on a cardiac exam. "A patient may come in reporting rapid or irregular heartbeat or palpitations," Dr. Chehade says. "Fatigue can also be a symptom."

Follow-up tests could include an echocardiogram, which uses sound waves to produce images of the heart; cardiac stress testing; blood work; and wearing a portable EKG monitor for 24 to 36 hours. High-risk patients may be prescribed a wearable ZIO XT Patch, which can monitor heart rhythms for up to 14 days.

WHAT ARE THE RISK FACTORS?

Medication and technology can help control AFib, but awareness and prevention are key. Risk factors for AFib include age (over 60); family history; the presence of other heart diseases; diabetes; hyperthyroidism; and asthma. "Obesity and sleep apnea are major risks," Dr. Chehade says. "People should also make lifestyle modifications as needed, including exercise, weight control, blood pressure control and moderating alcohol use." Highly caffeinated energy drinks also create a risk of irregular heartbeats, he says.

Your heart doesn't beat just for you. Get it checked.
For more information or to make an appointment with one of RWJUH Rahway's cardiologists, visit rwjbh.org/heart or call 888-MD-RWJUH.