

Atrial Fibrillation - How to Decrease Your Risk of Stroke

Learn About:

1. How is atrial fibrillation (AFib) related to a stroke?
2. What are the signs and symptoms of a stroke?
3. What to do if you have stroke symptoms
4. Ways to decrease your risk of a stroke

1. How is atrial fibrillation (AFib) related to stroke?

AFib is an uneven heart beat that can cause blood clots to form in the heart. If a blood clot breaks loose it can travel to your brain and cause a stroke. People with AFib are at higher risk for having a stroke than people who do not have AFib. The risk of stroke in people with AFib increases over time. For most people with AFib, the chance of having a stroke is 5 in 100 per year. This means if 100 people have AFib, 5 are likely to have a stroke every year. With proper treatment, the risk of stroke is lowered to about 1 in 100 per year.

Some people have a **Transient Ischemic Attack (TIA)** before they have a stroke. A TIA (also called a 'mini-stroke') is a brief lack of blood flow to the brain. A TIA is an important warning sign that you are at higher risk for a stroke. Symptoms of a TIA are the same as a stroke, but do not last very long (usually only lasting a few minutes or hours).

2. What are the signs and symptoms of a stroke?

A stroke can be treated. That is why it is important to know and respond to the warning signs:

Weakness: Sudden loss of strength or sudden numbness in your face, arm or leg, even for a short time.



Trouble speaking: Sudden difficulty speaking or understanding, or sudden confusion, even for a short time.



Vision problems: Sudden trouble with vision, blurred or double vision, even for a short time.



Headache: Sudden severe and unusual headache.



Dizziness: Sudden loss of balance. Dizziness is more serious with any of the other signs and symptoms.



3. What to do if you have symptoms of a stroke

If you have stroke or TIA symptoms **call 9-1-1 right away.**

If you experience a stroke, it is important to receive treatment right away. Some types of strokes can be treated with medicines that cause blood clots to dissolve, otherwise known as 'clot-busting drugs' (Alteplase or tPA). These medicines are given in the emergency department. They must be given right after someone has a stroke (within the first 3 hours) to work.

4. Ways to decrease your risk of a stroke

Taking the right medicine can decrease your risk of a stroke. Each medicine does this in a different way. There are two main types of medicines that decrease your risk of stroke: **antiplatelets** and **anticoagulants**. These are sometimes called 'blood thinners'. They decrease your risk of stroke by helping prevent blood clots from forming. However, this may also increase your risk of bleeding. Most patients with AFib should be on one of these medicines. The medicine that is best for you will depend on your risk of stroke.

Antiplatelets

Antiplatelets are generally used for patients with a low risk of stroke. Platelets are very small structures in your blood that clump together during blood clotting. By preventing this clumping, antiplatelet medicines reduce the chance of a blood clot forming and causing a stroke.

Common types of antiplatelets include:

- Aspirin® (also called ASA, acetylsalicylic acid)
- Clopidogrel (also called Plavix®)

Since these medicines prevent blood clots from forming, their main side effect is bleeding. You may notice a little bit of gum bleeding when you brush your teeth, or that you bleed a bit longer when you cut yourself, but you are still able to stop this bleeding. This is expected. If you notice UNUSUAL bleeding, such as blood in your urine or bloody or black, tarry stools, etc., it is important to contact your doctor right away. Call your doctor immediately if you have a serious fall or hit your head.

On the rare occasion, clopidogrel can also cause a rash, and some people complain of diarrhea right after they start taking clopidogrel which usually goes away on its own.

It is important to not combine antiplatelets with another blood thinner unless prescribed by your doctor.

Ways to decrease your risk of a stroke - continued

Anticoagulants

Anticoagulants are generally used for patients with a higher risk of stroke. They work by blocking the substances in your body that are responsible for blood clotting, called 'clotting factors'.

Common types of anticoagulants include:

- Warfarin (also called Coumadin®)
- Dabigatran (also called Pradaxa®)
- Rivaroxaban (also called Xarelto®)
- Apixaban (also called Eliquis®)

Each of these anticoagulants can have different side effects. Not all may be right for you. Your health care providers will discuss the benefits and risks of each of these medicines with you. Please see the following information sheets for more information about these medicines.