

# GETTING TO THE HEART OF STROKE AND ATRIAL FIBRILLATION

Help prevent a stroke  
by living well with  
Atrial Fibrillation (AF)



# WHAT IS ATRIAL FIBRILLATION?

**Atrial fibrillation (AF)** is the most common type of heartbeat disorder. It is a condition where the person's heart rate and/or heart rhythm are not normal.<sup>1</sup>

The heart's electrical system controls the rate and rhythm of the heart. When a person has AF, the electrical signals of the heart can become too fast and disorganized, which causes the heart to pump very fast and unevenly.<sup>1</sup>

*Nearly 250,000 Canadians  
live with AF.<sup>1</sup>*

# SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF ATRIAL FIBRILLATION

Some patients may not have any symptoms while some may have different symptoms, which can include:<sup>1</sup>

- Fast/irregular heartbeat, “skipped heartbeats”
- Heart palpitations or a rapid thumping in the chest
- Chest discomfort, chest pain or pressure
- Shortness of breath, particularly with exertion or anxiety
- Fatigue
- Dizziness, sweating, or nausea
- Lightheadedness or fainting

## COMPLICATIONS OF ATRIAL FIBRILLATION

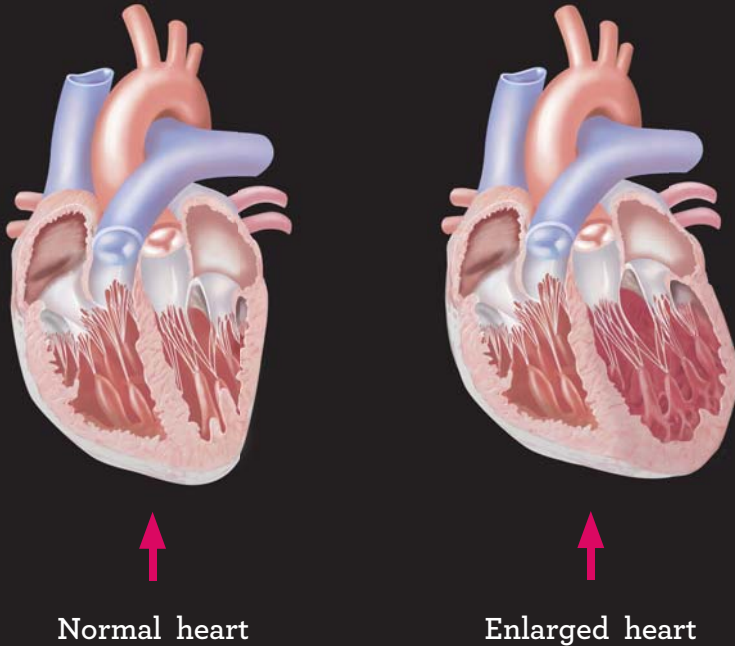
AF causes two major complications: heart failure and/or a stroke. When you have AF, the blood doesn't move properly in the heart and around the body.

*People with AF are  
3 to 5 times more likely  
to have a stroke.<sup>1</sup>*

## HEART FAILURE

Heart failure results when the heart is overworked. AF causes the heart to work too hard, and it becomes bloated, weak, and unable to pump blood and oxygen through the body and to the organs. AF wears your heart out. Heart failure is also called congestive heart failure or CHF.<sup>2</sup>

## HOW AF INCREASES HEART FAILURE



## WARNING SIGNS OF HEART FAILURE<sup>3</sup>

It is important to know the symptoms of heart failure and what to do if you or your loved one experiences any of them.

If you notice these symptoms, it is very important that you talk to your doctor.

**Common symptoms of heart failure include:**

- Fluid buildup in the lungs that causes shortness of breath
- Fluid buildup (swelling) in the lower limbs, feet, ankles, legs, and/or abdominal area
- Decreased heart function resulting in
  - Fatigue
  - Decreased exercise tolerance
  - Change in mental state, e.g., confusion
  - Kidney dysfunction

# STROKE

When you have AF, the blood doesn't move properly in the heart, and blood clots can form. These clots can move to other parts of the body, like the brain, and cause serious problems.<sup>1</sup> When a blood clot in the brain blocks blood and oxygen from getting to the brain, one experiences a stroke.<sup>1</sup>

# HOW AF INCREASES STROKE RISK<sup>1</sup>

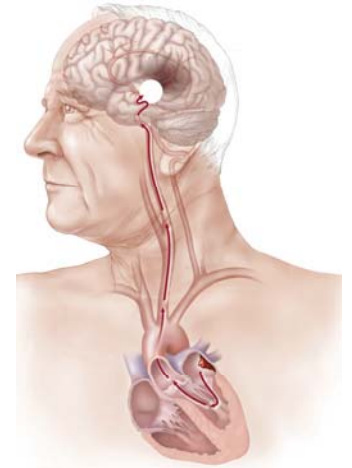
AF causes blood to pool in your heart and form clots.



Clots can move from your heart to your brain.



Clots in your brain block blood flow and oxygen to your brain.



## WARNING SIGNS OF STROKE<sup>4</sup>

A stroke is very dangerous and could be life-threatening. It is important to know the early signs of a stroke and what to do if you or your loved one experiences any of them.

Listed are the five warning signs of a stroke. If you notice these signs, it is very important that you **call 911** or **your local emergency number** right away.

### WEAKNESS

- Sudden loss of strength or sudden numbness in the face, arm or leg, even if temporary

### TROUBLE SPEAKING

- Sudden difficulty speaking or understanding or sudden confusion, even if temporary

### VISION PROBLEMS

- Sudden trouble with vision, even if temporary

### HEADACHE

- Sudden severe and unusual headache

### DIZZINESS

- Sudden loss of balance, especially with any of the above signs

# STROKE PREVENTION<sup>4</sup>

If you have AF, an important part of preventing a stroke and other heart problems is following a healthy lifestyle. Know the risk factors for a stroke; avoid or get treatment for those you can change. The more risk factors you have, the greater your risk for a stroke.



## **RISK FACTORS YOU CAN'T CONTROL<sup>4</sup>**

- Age
- Gender
- Family history
- Ethnicity
- History of strokes or TIA

## **RISK FACTORS YOU CAN DO SOMETHING ABOUT<sup>4</sup>**

- High blood pressure
- High cholesterol
- Diabetes
- Being overweight
- Drinking too much alcohol
- Not exercising regularly
- Smoking
- Stress

# HEALTHY LIVING & STROKE PREVENTION

Now that you know which risk factors you have, you can take steps to reduce your risk. Here are some tips to help you make healthy lifestyle choices and lower your risk of a stroke.<sup>1,5</sup>

- **Maintain good blood pressure control**
- **Follow a heart healthy diet:**
  - Low in saturated fat, trans fat, cholesterol, and sodium
  - Daily servings of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lean protein
  - Alcohol only in small amounts
- **Maintain a healthy weight**
- **Get regular exercise**
  - Light-to-moderate physical activities can help
  - Walking, gardening, etc.
- **Quit smoking**
- **Take all your medications as prescribed**

*Consult your doctor before making lifestyle changes.*

# TALKING TO YOUR DOCTOR ABOUT AF AND STROKE

It's important to remember that people with AF can still live normal, active lives. Your doctor is there to help, but you must take an active role in managing your AF and lowering your risk of a stroke. Talk to your doctor about managing your AF, as well as other risk factors for a stroke.

- **Be educated:** learn all you can about AF and stroke
- **Tell your doctor** any symptoms you are experiencing from your condition or medications
- **Know what to ask your doctor** and bring questions to each visit

## QUESTIONS YOU CAN ASK YOUR DOCTOR

- Can you tell me more about stroke?
- As well as AF, do I have other risk factors for a stroke?
- Are there any medications I can take to manage my AF or to help reduce my chance of having a stroke?
- What is my blood pressure?  
What is normal blood pressure?  
What can I do to control my blood pressure?
- Should I have my cholesterol checked?  
What are normal cholesterol levels?  
What can I do to control my cholesterol?
- Am I at a healthy body weight?  
What can I do to control my weight?
- Can you help me quit smoking?
- What other lifestyle changes can I make to reduce my chance of having a stroke?

## ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS YOU MIGHT HAVE:

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## WANT TO LEARN MORE?

If you would like to speak to someone to get more information please call the National Office for the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada at: (613) 569 4361.

### ATRIAL FIBRILLATION

- [www.heartofstroke.com/AF](http://www.heartofstroke.com/AF)
- [www.stopafib.org](http://www.stopafib.org)
- [www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/dci/Diseases/af/af\\_what.html](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/dci/Diseases/af/af_what.html)
- [www.americanheart.org/presenter.jhtml?identifier=4451](http://www.americanheart.org/presenter.jhtml?identifier=4451)
- [www.heartandstroke.com/site/c.ikIQLcMWJtE/b.5052135/k.15A/Atrial\\_fibrillation.htm?src=header](http://www.heartandstroke.com/site/c.ikIQLcMWJtE/b.5052135/k.15A/Atrial_fibrillation.htm?src=header)

### STROKE

- [www.heartandstroke.ca](http://www.heartandstroke.ca)
- [www.canadianstrokenetwork.ca](http://www.canadianstrokenetwork.ca)
- [www.canadianstrokestrategy.ca](http://www.canadianstrokestrategy.ca)
- [www.strokeassociation.org](http://www.strokeassociation.org)

### HEALTHY LIVING

Please visit [www.heartandstroke.com/healthyliving](http://www.heartandstroke.com/healthyliving) to find more information on these and many other topics:

- Healthy eating
- Getting physically active
- Maintaining a healthy weight
- Coping with stress
- Help quitting smoking



## REFERENCES

1. Heart & Stroke Foundation. Atrial fibrillation. Last Update 2009. Available at: <http://www.heartandstroke.on.ca/site/pp.aspx?c=pv13JeNWJwE&b=5052981&printmode=1>. Accessed March 25, 2011.
2. Lip GYH, DiMarco JP. Atrial Fibrillation. In: Crawford MH, DiMarco JP, eds. *Cardiology*. London, UK. Mosby; 2001:4.10.1 - 4.10.18.
3. Patel AR, Konstam MA. Assessment of the Patient with Heart Failure. In: Crawford MH, DiMarco JP, eds. *Cardiology*. London, UK. Mosby; 2001:5.2.1 - 5.2.10.
4. Heart & Stroke Foundation. Taking control: Lower your risk of heart disease and stroke. Last Update 2010. Available at: [http://www.heartandstroke.com/site/c.ikiQLcMWJtE/b.3751103/k3C8D/Heart\\_disease\\_\\_Taking\\_Control\\_\\_Lower\\_your\\_risk\\_of\\_heart\\_disease\\_and\\_stroke.htm](http://www.heartandstroke.com/site/c.ikiQLcMWJtE/b.3751103/k3C8D/Heart_disease__Taking_Control__Lower_your_risk_of_heart_disease_and_stroke.htm). Accessed March 25, 2011.
5. Merck Sharp & Dohme Corp. Tools of Prevention. Merck Manual—Home Edition. Available at: <http://www.merckmanuals.com/home/sec01/cho05/cho05b.html>. Accessed March 25, 2011.

[www.heartofstroke.com/AF](http://www.heartofstroke.com/AF)



103054