



AF Association
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Anticoagulation and atrial fibrillation

This information sheet is intended to provide patients affected by AFib with information regarding the options for anticoagulation for AFib-related stroke risk reduction.

Introduction

Atrial fibrillation (also referred to as AFib or AF) is a heart rhythm problem that makes the pulse irregular. This type of condition is called a 'cardiac arrhythmia'. AFib is the most common cardiac arrhythmia. Although it can be identified in the young, it becomes more common with older age. It is thought that one in twelve people over 65 years have AFib.

AFib can cause palpitations, shortness of breath, chest discomfort, light-headedness, fainting or fatigue. Some patients have no symptoms with AFib. It does not matter if the AFib has symptoms or not, the risk of an AFib-related stroke remains significant.

There are two main goals in managing AFib. The first is to reduce a person's risk of an AFib-related stroke. The second is to stop or reduce symptoms caused by the irregular heart rhythm.

AFib-related strokes

The heart's natural rhythm is controlled by a pacemaker called the sinus node in the upper chamber of the heart. This pacemaker triggers a smooth contraction of the heart. The contraction starts in the upper chamber (atrium) of the heart, forcing the blood smoothly into the lower pumping chamber (ventricle). While the ventricle is contracting, the upper chamber relaxes to allow the returning blood to be stored for a moment until the lower chamber is ready to receive it.

In AFib, the contractions of the upper chamber becomes disorganised and does not contract smoothly. The atria appear to shake like jelly. In this situation the blood flow reduces in some

areas, especially in a side chamber of the left atrium called the 'left atrial appendage'. When the blood stops moving it will tend to form clots. When clots have formed in the atrium, there is a chance that they will move into the blood flow and be carried in the circulation to smaller blood vessels of the brain. When an area of the brain has its blood supply blocked by a clot, this causes an ischaemic (clot caused) stroke. Most AFib clot related illness occur in the brain as a stroke but can cause issues in other areas of the circulation.

Blood clotting

The complex process of blood clotting allows it to remain fluid normally, but to clot rapidly when needed. The process is often referred to as the 'clotting cascade' by doctors. This term is used to explain how the stimulation to form a clot triggers a series of steps before producing the blood enzyme thrombin. This enzyme changes the soluble protein fibrinogen to the insoluble protein fibrin. Clots are made of fibrin.

A second clotting system is also active. This involves small cells found in the circulation called platelets. When platelets are triggered to heal a leak in the circulation they become tacky and stick together. As they stick together they trigger yet more platelets to become active and stick together. In this way they form a clot.

Preventing an AFib-related stroke

Several treatments are available which reduce the risk of an AFib-related stroke significantly. Mostly, this is in the form of anticoagulation, sometimes called blood thinning.

There are now five commonly prescribed anticoagulants: the vitamin K antagonist warfarin, and the non-vitamin K antagonists dabigatran, rivaroxaban, apixaban and edoxaban. It is very important that you discuss with your doctor which option is most suitable for you.



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Published February 2011 | Reviewed November 2025

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Reduce platelet stickiness: Medication can reduce the tendency for platelets to stick together and thereby prevent platelet clots. The main medications in this area are aspirin and clopidogrel.

Left atrial appendage: The side chamber of the left atrium is a common area for the blood flow to be reduced with a risk of clots forming. This area can be blocked off or in extreme cases removed to reduce the risk of clots forming here. This option is usually recommended to people who are unable to tolerate or are contraindicated for an anticoagulant.

AFib-related stroke and aspirin

In 2023, The American College of Cardiology AFIB Guidelines recommend that aspirin either alone or in combination with clopidogrel as an alternative to anticoagulation is not recommended to reduce stroke risk of an AFib-related stroke. The most effective option is an anticoagulant, but if there are reasons why this therapy cannot be used, then in a few cases, 'dual antiplatelet therapy' (aspirin and clopidogrel together) may be an option. However, anticoagulants are more effective in reducing the risk of a bleed and an AFib-related stroke.

Personal stroke risk

By looking at large groups of people with AFib

and seeing who develops strokes, we have been able to identify certain factors that increase the risk of stroke. From these, we have developed the CHA₂DS₂-VASc scoring system (shown below).

Annual AFib-related stroke risk is under 2% at score 0 rising to over 10% for a score of 5 or 6. Most experts would suggest that the tipping point where the benefits of taking anticoagulation outweigh its risk, is at a CHA₂DS₂-VASc score of 1 or above. However, there are situations where your doctor may recommend that using anticoagulants may be of value despite what appears to be a low score (eg score of zero) using the above system. They will discuss this if it is the case.

AF Association factsheets which may be of help:

Apixaban / Dabigtran / Rivaroxaban / Warfarin therapy / Warfarin and diet / Warfarin and other medication / Aspirin and AF: FAQs

To view our patient resources, scan the QR code below:



Acknowledgments: AF Association would like to thank all those who helped in the development and review of this publication. Particular thanks are given to Dr Matt Fay and Prof. G.Y.H Lip and Francesca Calahan.

Questions	Points	Your Score
Are you over 75?	2	
Are you over 65-74?	1	
Birth gender female?	1	
Do you have high blood pressure?	1	
Do you have diabetes?	1	
Do you have heart failure?	1	
Do you have angina, suffered a heart attack or have circulatorn problems including problems with the aorta*?	1	
Have you suffered a stroke (even a mild stroke)?	2	
Total	-	

*The aorta is the large blood vessel in the abdomen that can become 'dilated' or swollen forming what is called an 'aneurysm'.



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