

Understanding the Link Between Atrial Fibrillation & Heart Failure

What is Atrial Fibrillation (AF)?

Atrial Fibrillation (AF) is an irregular and often rapid heart rhythm (arrhythmia) that affects the upper chambers of the heart (atria). This can cause poor blood flow and increase the risk of stroke, heart failure, and other complications. AF is the most common arrhythmia worldwide, affecting approximately 37.5 million people globally. Its prevalence increases with age, affecting about 2% of people under 65 but rising to over 9% in those older than 80.

What is Heart Failure?

Heart failure occurs when the heart is unable to pump blood effectively, leading to symptoms such as fatigue, shortness of breath, and fluid retention. It can develop due to various conditions, including high blood pressure, coronary artery disease, and AF. Heart failure affects around 64 million people worldwide, with an estimated 1-2% prevalence in the general population, increasing to over 10% in individuals over 70.

The Connection Between AF and Heart Failure

AF and heart failure are closely linked. People with AF are at an increased risk of developing heart failure, and those with heart failure have a higher chance of experiencing AF. This is because:

- AF causes the heart to beat irregularly, making it harder to pump blood efficiently.
- The irregular rhythm can lead to a weakened heart over time.

- Heart failure can cause changes in the heart that trigger AF. Studies suggest that up to 50% of patients with heart failure will develop AF at some point, and individuals with AF have a threefold increased risk of developing heart failure and fivefold increased risk of an AF-related stroke compared to those without AF.

Symptoms to Watch For

If you have AF or heart failure, it is important to monitor symptoms and seek medical advice if they worsen. Common symptoms include:

Atrial Fibrillation Symptoms:

- Irregular or rapid heartbeat
- Palpitations (fluttering or pounding in the chest)
- Dizziness or light-headedness
- Shortness of breath
- Fatigue

Heart Failure Symptoms:

- Shortness of breath, especially when lying down or with activity
- Swelling in the legs, ankles, or abdomen
- Fatigue and weakness
- Rapid or irregular heartbeat
- Persistent cough or wheezing

Treatment Options:

Managing AF and heart failure together requires a comprehensive treatment plan, which may include:

1. Medications:

- Anticoagulants to prevent AF-related strokes (eg, warfarin and DOACs)



AF Association
☎ + 44 (0) 1789 867 502
✉ info@afa.org.uk

- Beta-blockers or rate-limiting calcium channel blockers and/or digoxin to control heart rate
- Diuretics to reduce fluid buildup in heart failure
- ACE inhibitors or ARBs to improve heart function
- Mineralocorticoid Receptor Antagonists eg spironolactone or eplerenone
- SGLT2 inhibitors eg, dapagliflozin or empagliflozin
- Neprilysin inhibitor + ARB

2. Lifestyle Changes:

- Maintain a heart-healthy diet (low in salt and processed foods)
- Engage in regular exercise (as recommended by your doctor)
- Limit alcohol and caffeine intake
- Stop smoking and manage stress

3. Medical Procedures:

- Cardioversion to reset heart rhythm if indicated
- Ablation therapy to target abnormal heart tissue causing AF if indicated
- Pacemakers or implantable devices for severe cases

When to Seek Help - Contact your healthcare provider if you experience:

- Worsening shortness of breath or swelling
- Severe chest pain
- Dizziness or fainting spells
- Sudden and persistent irregular heartbeats
- Or worrying symptoms that might include an evolving stroke

Early detection and treatment can significantly improve quality of life. If you have concerns about AF or heart failure, speak with your doctor today.

For more information and support, visit:
www.afa.org.uk

Email: info@afa.org.uk

Telephone: +44 1789 867 502

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. In particular, thanks are given to Dr John Cannon..



Founder & CEO: Trudie Lobban MBE, FRCP (Edin)
Registered Charity No. 1122442
© AF Association
Published March 2025

