

ATRIAL FIBRILLATION (AF)

Atrial fibrillation (AF) is the most common clinical heart rhythm condition. An abnormal rhythm in the top part of the heart generates an irregular pulse and alters the way the heart functions. AF is more common in patients who have high blood pressure, valvular heart disease and heart failure. AF is recognised to be more common in athletes.



HOW COMMON IS IT?

AF affects at least 1% of the population but it becomes more common with increasing age so that it affects as many as 1 in 20 at the age of 65 and 1 in 10 by the age of 80.

WHAT SYMPTOMS MIGHT I GET?

Often none, although some patients with AF describe symptoms of palpitation, giddiness, breathlessness and fatigue. The irregular heart rhythm can cause small clots to form within the heart. If these leave the heart they can result in stroke. The abnormality in heart function can also result in the onset of heart failure.

WHAT EXTRA TESTS ARE REQUIRED?

You may need a heart ultrasound called an echocardiogram to look at your heart structure and function. Some patients require a heart monitor to look at their heart rate profile.

WILL I NEED TREATMENT?

Patients with AF often need medication to thin their blood to reduce the risk of stroke. Drug therapy is sometimes required to slow the heart rate. Selected patients require rhythm stabilising medication and are recommended to have an electrical procedure called cardioversion to restore the rhythm to normal. Occasionally a more complex procedure called ablation is necessary to maintain a normal heart rhythm.

IS IT HEREDITARY?

Usually not but there are rare cases where AF is more common in certain families.

DOES THIS AFFECT MY LIFE EXPECTANCY?

AF has been associated with a reduced life expectancy (largely because of stroke and heart failure) although with modern treatment most patients lead an entirely normal life.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

If you have been diagnosed with AF, a consultation can be arranged with your GP or local cardiologist to discuss treatment options.

USEFUL LINKS

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atrial_fibrillation

HeartforLife

www.heartforlife.co.uk

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