

Understanding Atrial Fibrillation and the Recent Advances in Anticoagulation Care



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Understanding Atrial Fibrillation (AF)



Why is it so important for AF patients to understand their condition and its link to stroke?



Atrial Fibrillation (AF) is the most common heart rhythm disorder and a leading cause of stroke. AF is estimated to affect over 33 million people worldwide, yet few people have heard of the condition or know what it is. AF is a type of arrhythmia (irregular heart rhythm). The four chambers of the heart which normally beat in rhythm, lose the ability to do so. The heart rhythm becomes erratic – sometimes fast, sometimes slow.

When this happens, the blood does not flow smoothly through the heart. A clot may form and break away, travelling to the brain to cause an AF-related stroke.



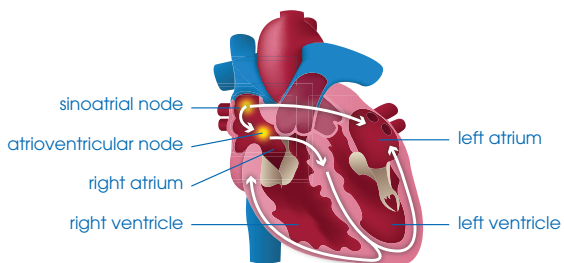
AF-related strokes are often more disabling and debilitating than most other types of stroke; yet with modern therapy, the risk of an AF-related stroke can be greatly reduced.



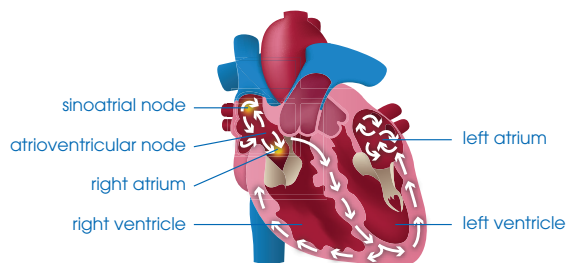
How Atrial Fibrillation (AF) affects the heart

→ electrical impulse

NORMAL HEART



ATRIAL FIBRILLATION



How does anticoagulation therapy help to protect against AF-related stroke?



Once AF is diagnosed, anticoagulation therapy may be recommended. Anticoagulation therapy is not a treatment for AF, it does however greatly reduce the risk of an AF-related stroke. You should discuss treatment options to manage AF with your healthcare professional.



Are there any specific tools available to help patients learn more and manage their condition?



It is important to understand and therefore better manage AF with information, support and education. Although there are many resources available on the internet, it is important to ensure the information is provided by a reliable accredited source such as the AF Association, which has healthcare professionals overseeing all materials produced to ensure their accuracy. A new website – 'Living With AF... finding my way' – takes the viewer through interviews and resources with AF patients sharing their own experiences. It offers advice on how best to manage AF whilst still living a full life despite of AF.



The Future of AF Management

Q

What do the recent advances in anticoagulation care mean to AF patients?

A

For almost 60 years the only anticoagulant available was warfarin and for many patients this has proved to be life-saving by reducing the risk of AF-related stroke. However, for some it may not be suitable. Fortunately, in the last few years, more anticoagulant medicines have become available and so the AF patient has greater choice to find the one that best suits them and their lifestyle. The more recent anticoagulants do not require regular blood tests and are not associated with many food or drug interactions. In discussion with their doctor, patients can now find the best anticoagulant to suit their needs to reduce the risk of an AF-related stroke.



More recently, there is now an option with one of the anticoagulants to use a 'reversal agent' if emergency surgery or urgent anticoagulant reversal is needed. Although these occasions are rare, the 'reversal agent' would reduce the risk of a bleed during the operation, allaying fears and concerns.

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Do you think patients are aware of what options are available to physicians if they were to require unexpected emergency surgery or urgent anticoagulant reversal?

A

We all hope we will never require surgery of any description and certainly not emergency surgery. Few of us consider the consequences of what medication we may be taking and what might happen if emergency surgery was required. It is important to discuss with your doctor all therapeutic options to reduce your risk of an AF-related stroke as well as treatment options and how these might affect your care in the unlikely event that emergency reversal is needed.



Being informed and educated on the available options ensures that both you and your doctor are making informed decisions on what is best for you, your condition and your lifestyle. With greater awareness comes greater choice and better outcomes.

Q

What advice (if any) do you give patients who want to take more of an active role in discussing and choosing anticoagulation therapy with their physician? Could this lead to better therapy adherence?

A

I always advise patients to download and complete our AF checklist prior to a visit to their doctor. This prepares the patient and also helps the doctor.

Ideally a caregiver should accompany the patient to the appointment so they too have a greater understanding and can encourage and support the patient with their medication and living with AF. I also encourage them to ask the following questions:

1. What is anticoagulation therapy?
2. What will it do?
3. How important is it that I take it every day as prescribed?
4. What is an AF-related stroke?
5. Will I feel better?
6. What treatment options are there for AF?

An educated and informed patient is more likely to adhere to their medication as they understand the reason for taking it as prescribed to reduce their risk of AF-related stroke and the consequences if they do not.



Q

How can patients feel more in control of their condition?

A

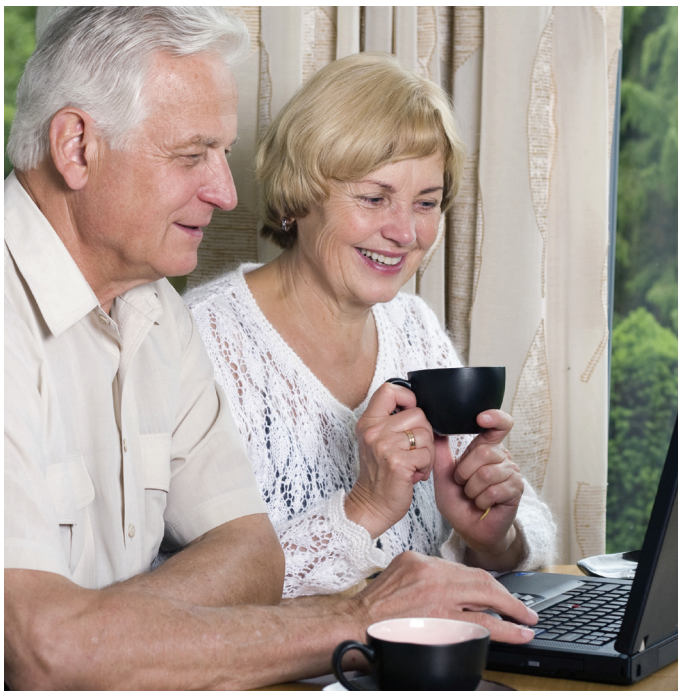
Once a patient understands the condition they have been diagnosed with and has the information to learn more about how best to live with and manage it, they are better placed to feel in control of their condition. Patient information should be provided at doctor's appointment and recommendations given to valuable web sites. The AF Association also hosts Patient Days where both healthcare professionals and patients attend – these have proven invaluable to so many. Meeting someone with the same condition as yourself immediately provides reassurance to the patient and their loved ones. We also host an online forum with thousands of AF patients and caregivers sharing experiences, offering advice and reassurance. The AF Association dedicated Helpline also makes it possible for patients to call at any time to seek advice and understanding, often when they do not want to worry their loved ones or if living alone.

Q

Do you think in the next 5 years, there will be an increase in AF patients wanting to take more of an active role in discussing anticoagulant options for AF-related stroke prevention?

A

As greater awareness of AF is achieved, so will the demands by patients and their loved ones for more knowledge, greater choice and better outcomes. Patients today are better educated, have access to a wealth of information and expect positive outcomes, therefore the demand for understanding of what is the best medication and how they can access this medication, will increase.



Q

What advice would you give to patients recently diagnosed with AF?

A

Just diagnosed with Atrial Fibrillation? Or should that be Alone and Frustrated? Millions of people worldwide are living with AF and with the right information and an informed discussion with your healthcare professional, you too can learn to live with AF and reduce the risk of AF-related stroke with appropriate anticoagulation therapy and manage the symptoms of AF with access to available treatments. Make contact with organisations such as AF Association (www.heartrhythmalliance.org) who will have a wealth of information for you, your loved ones and your healthcare professional.



Make sure you discuss all available options and choose, together with your doctor, what is best for YOU. Remember, no one chooses to be a patient – we all want to be restored to a person.



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