



ATRIAL FIBRILLATION

What you need to know

Atrial fibrillation (AF) is an abnormal heart rhythm characterized by an irregular heartbeat that is often very rapid.

What is atrial fibrillation?

Atrial fibrillation (AF) is an irregular heart rhythm, also called an “arrhythmia,” caused by electrical signal disturbances in the heart. It’s the most common type of arrhythmia. The word “atrial” refers to the atria, the two upper chambers of the heart, where the AF happens.

Atrial fibrillation causes rapid, irregular, and disorganized electrical signals, which affect the heart’s ability to pump blood. Atrial fibrillation can cause the heart to beat faster than 110 beats per minute. When the heart beats faster than normal, it’s called tachycardia.

Generally, the risk of AF increases with age and other factors such as diabetes, high blood pressure, and underlying heart disease.

One of the main complications of AF is that it can cause a stroke.

What are the symptoms of atrial fibrillation?

Some people with AF may feel perfectly fine and not even know they have it until it’s found on a routine electrocardiogram.

Other people with AF may experience a variety of symptoms, including:

- irregular or rapid pulse;
- heart palpitations;
- chest discomfort, pain, or pressure;
- Shortness of breath on effort or anxiety;
- Dizziness, sweating, nausea;
- Fatigue, weakness, or loss of consciousness.

What to do:

- If you have one or more of the following symptoms, consult your doctor.

Go to the

Emergency department immediately if you develop these symptoms:

- Heartbeat faster than 120 beats per minute;
- Fever above 38.5 °C (101.3 °F) or chills;
- Difficulty breathing;
- Chest pain;
- Agitation;
- Confusion.



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How does the medical team diagnose AF?

If the medical team suspects atrial fibrillation, they'll take your medical history and ask you questions about your health condition and risk factors. Using a stethoscope, they'll listen for a rapid or irregular heartbeat. If your pulse is rapid and irregular, your medical team may order tests for atrial fibrillation. The main diagnostic test is the electrocardiogram (or ECG). Blood tests are also needed to rule out thyroid disease or other chemical imbalances.

If your ECG shows AF, a cardiologist will need to do more diagnostic tests (echocardiogram, Holter test, chest X-ray) to decide how best to treat your symptoms, based on your risks, your medical profile, and the impact your symptoms are having on your quality of life.

You may be prescribed beta-blockers and anticoagulants to control some of the symptoms or risk factors.

How to prevent AF

You can prevent AF by leading a healthy lifestyle:

- Staying physically active;
- Eating a healthy diet (nutritious foods low in saturated and trans fats and plenty of fruits and vegetables, fibre, and lean protein);
- Quitting smoking;
- Limiting alcohol;
- Reducing stress as much as possible.

Any lifestyle changes that lower blood pressure (such as maintaining a healthy weight) are likely to reduce your risk of AF and improve your health.

See your doctor or specialized nurse practitioner (SNP) regularly—they're the best person to monitor your heart rhythm.

Resources

You can call **Info-Santé (811)** at any time.

Clinical intake department
(from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.,
Monday to Friday, except
holidays):

- **Hôpital Anna-Laberge**
450-699-2425, ext. 4383
- **Hôpital du Suroît**
450-371-9920, ext. 2835

References:

- Heart and Stroke Foundation
- Canadian Cardiovascular Society

Our mission

Maintain, improve, and restore the health and well-being of the Québec population by providing access to a set of quality, integrated health and social services, thereby contributing to the social and economic development of Québec.

Our vision

Accessible, efficient health care and services that are adapted to the needs of Quebecers.

Our goals

The CISSS de la Montérégie-Ouest achieves its goals through its innovative approaches and stands apart through:

- The excellence of its local, integrated care and services offer focused on interdisciplinarity, accessibility, and adaptation to the needs of the population;
- Its courage to question and improve its professional, clinical, and management practices;
- Recognition for the contribution of its staff and implementation of human resources management practices;
- The strength of its relationships with its partners.

Our values

Our actions are guided by five interdependent, cohesive values: compassion, collaboration, confidence, commitment, and consistency.