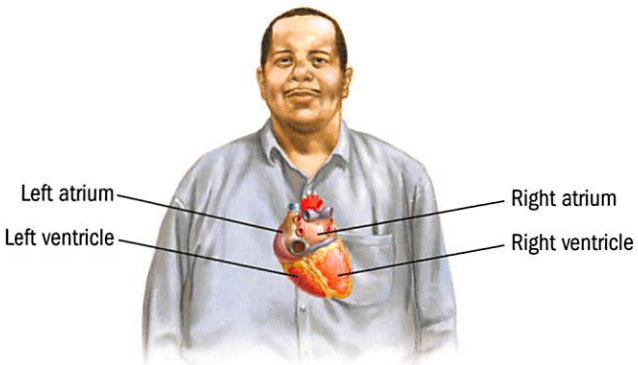
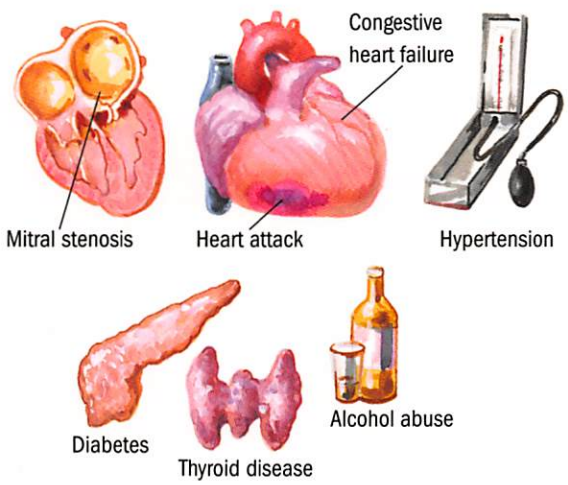
MANAGING YOUR ATRIAL FIBRILLATION

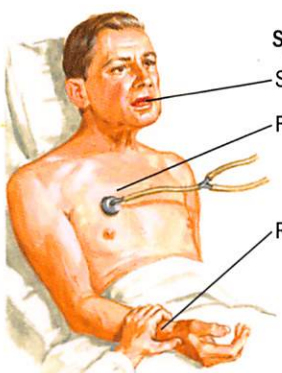


In atrial fibrillation, muscles in the wall of the upper heart chambers (left and right atrium) twitch abnormally. This causes the ventricles to work harder to get blood to the body, and heart failure may result.

Causes of and conditions related to atrial fibrillation



Symptoms of atrial fibrillation



Atrial fibrillation is diagnosed through an electrocardiogram (ECG).

What Is Atrial Fibrillation?

An abnormal heart rhythm is called an *arrhythmia*. Atrial fibrillation is one type of abnormal rhythm. The muscle looks as if it is wiggling instead of squeezing (contracting).

What Happens During Atrial Fibrillation?

The human heart has four chambers. The upper ones are called atria; the lower ones, ventricles. All chambers must squeeze in a certain way to move the blood properly. A fibrillating atrium, however, has small, irregular, fast contractions. All the blood inside the atria is not pumped into ventricles, so blood pools. Pooled blood may clot, and clots can be pushed into the bloodstream and cause strokes. Ventricles work harder to get blood to the body, and heart failure may result.

What Causes Atrial Fibrillation?

Among the many causes, the most common is aging. Others are heart problems such as hypertension (high blood pressure), congestive heart failure (CHF), and mitral valve disease (mitral stenosis). Lung diseases, other illnesses (e.g., diabetes), and overactive thyroid are more causes. Caffeine, nicotine (cigarettes), and too much alcohol can cause it or make it worse.

What Are the Symptoms of Atrial Fibrillation?

Many people have atrial fibrillation and never feel it.

Symptoms often include the feeling of irregular or too fast (palpitations) heartbeats. Difficulty breathing, chest pain, or fainting may occur. Some people feel tired or cannot exercise.

Chest pain or signs of stroke must be checked immediately.

How Is Atrial Fibrillation Diagnosed?

The doctor looks for a certain pattern on an electrocardiogram (ECG), which shows the heart's electrical activity.

The doctor may check movements of the atria with an echocardiogram (using ultrasound to examine the heart).