



# ATRIAL FIBRILLATION: MEDICATIONS TO REDUCE THE RISK OF STROKE

Your doctor has diagnosed you with atrial fibrillation. You may be wondering what it is and what that means for your health.



## WHAT IS ATRIAL FIBRILLATION?

Atrial fibrillation is a heart condition in which the upper chambers of your heart don't beat properly. Instead, they may quiver or beat irregularly. When this happens, the upper chambers can't push enough blood through your heart.<sup>1</sup> You may have no symptoms, or you may feel the irregular heart beat — an odd sensation that can be scary.

## IS ATRIAL FIBRILLATION DANGEROUS?

The actual irregular beats you feel during an atrial fibrillation “attack” are not harmful. The danger comes from potential complications of atrial fibrillation, particularly a stroke. You are five times more likely to have a stroke if you have atrial fibrillation than if you don't.<sup>2</sup> Because the upper chambers of the heart cannot pump out all the blood they contain, the blood pools inside the chambers and a clot may form. If that clot is pumped out of the heart, it can travel through your blood vessels to your brain, block a blood vessel, and cause a stroke.<sup>3</sup>

## ABOUT ATRIAL FIBRILLATION AND STROKE

- One in three people with *untreated* atrial fibrillation will have a stroke.<sup>4</sup>
- Strokes in people with atrial fibrillation tend to be more severe and result in greater disability than strokes in people without the condition.<sup>5</sup>
- Atrial fibrillation causes 15% of all strokes.<sup>2</sup>

Other possible complications of atrial fibrillation include heart failure, because your heart has to work so much harder to pump enough blood, and other heart rhythm problems.<sup>3</sup>



## HOW CAN I PREVENT A STROKE?

If your risk of having a stroke is low to very low, based on your age and medical history, you may not need treatment. Otherwise, your doctor will talk to you about taking medication to reduce the risk of blood clots. These include:

**Aspirin.** Yes, taking an aspirin (81 mg to 325 mg) every day can reduce your risk of blood clots! Aspirin alone, however, is only recommended for those with a low risk of stroke. That includes people who are younger than 75, have not had a previous stroke or mini stroke, do not have heart failure, do not have high blood pressure or diabetes, and have not had a heart valve replaced.

**Warfarin (Coumadin®).** Warfarin is considered the “gold standard” of stroke prevention in atrial fibrillation. It has been used for more than 50 years and can significantly reduce the risk of stroke. However, it requires regular blood tests to make sure you’re getting the right amount of medication. In addition, certain foods or medications may reduce or increase its effectiveness or increase the risk of bleeding or clot formation.<sup>6</sup>

**Clopidogrel (Plavix®).** This medication is typically recommended in combination with aspirin if you can’t take warfarin, especially if you need to take these medications because of a recent heart attack or stent placement. Even when combined with aspirin, however, it is not as effective as warfarin.<sup>7,8</sup>

**Dabigatran (Pradaxa®), Rivaroxaban (Xarelto®), Apixaban (Eliquis®), and Edoxaban (Savaysa™).** These are the newest medications available to reduce the risk of stroke in people with atrial fibrillation. Studies have found them to be just as effective as or more effective than warfarin, but these medications do not require regular blood tests to know that they are working. They have no interactions with food and fewer interactions with other medications than warfarin<sup>9-12</sup>; however, they cost more than warfarin. Further, these medications work quickly and leave your body more quickly compared to warfarin, so it is very important to take them as prescribed and talk to your doctor before you stop taking them. These medications may not be for everyone, especially patients with liver or kidney disease.

You and your doctor will determine which medication is right for you. The most important thing is that you take the medication as directed, tell your doctor if you have any problems or concerns, and maintain a healthy lifestyle.



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