

Lifestyle Changes to Manage Atrial Fibrillation (AFib)

Healthy lifestyle changes are an important part of treatment for **atrial fibrillation (AFib)**. People who have AFib are at increased risk for conditions such as heart failure and stroke. Many patients with AFib also have high blood pressure, heart disease, and diabetes. When you follow a heart-healthy lifestyle, you can limit experiences that trigger (cause) AFib, as well as reduce your risk of heart disease.

What lifestyle changes can I make to manage AFib?

Here are a few simple changes you can make, and good habits you can practice, to protect your heart and help you feel your best.

Take your medication

To get the most benefit from your medications, it is important to take them as prescribed by your provider. Your AFib will be better controlled, and your overall health will improve, when you take your medications as directed.

“**As prescribed**” means you take your medication:

- In the right way
- At the right dose
- At the right time
- At the right frequency

When it comes to your medications, follow these tips:

- Keep medications away from heat, light, and moisture.
- Tell your provider if you have any side effects, or if you don't think your medication is making a difference.

- Keep an updated list of your medications. It's important that all of your providers know all of the prescription medications, over-the-counter drugs, nutritional supplements, or herbal preparations you're taking.

Control your blood pressure

High blood pressure is a major risk factor for heart disease and stroke. When your blood pressure stays within healthy ranges, you reduce the strain on your heart, arteries, and kidneys, which keeps you healthier longer.

Maintain a healthy weight

People who are obese (who have a body mass index, or BMI, over 30) are 5 times more at risk for AFib than people with a lower weight and BMI. When you lose extra fat and unnecessary pounds, you can reduce strain on your heart, lungs, blood vessels, and skeleton. This can help you be more active, lower your blood pressure, and help you feel better too.

Get tested for sleep apnea

Sleep apnea is a condition where a person stops breathing for periods of time during their sleep. Over time, these periods of low oxygen can lead to changes in the heart. Research shows that people with untreated sleep apnea have a harder time controlling AFib. Treating your sleep apnea can improve your symptoms and manage AFib.

Avoid alcohol

Research shows alcohol can be a major trigger for AFib episodes. Having even 1 glass of alcohol can double your chance of an AFib episode within 4 hours. If you already don't drink alcohol, don't start. It's best to avoid drinking alcohol.

Start a healthy eating plan

A healthy diet is one of your best options for fighting heart disease. When you eat a heart-healthy diet, you improve your chances of feeling good and staying healthy.

A heart-healthy eating plan should include:

- Fresh, frozen, or no-salt added vegetables such as spinach, kale, green beans, or broccoli
- Fresh, frozen, or canned fruits without added sugar such as oranges, apples, peaches, and fruit cocktail
- Fish containing omega-3 fatty acids (like salmon, trout, and herring) at least 2 times a week
- Lean meats such as poultry (chicken, turkey) without the skin, lean ground beef, or pork tenderloin
- Fiber-rich whole grains such as brown or wild rice, quinoa, or oats (we recommend that whole grains make up at least half of the grains you eat)
- Skim or low-fat (1%) dairy products

A heart-healthy eating plan should limit:

- Drinks and foods with added sugars
- Foods high in sodium
 - To lower your blood pressure, eat less than 2300 milligrams (mg) of sodium a day. Lowering your daily sodium to 1500 mg is best. If you can't meet these goals right now, even reducing your sodium intake by 1000 mg (about 1/2 teaspoon of salt) per day can help your blood pressure.
- Alcohol

Control your cholesterol levels



High cholesterol can lead to increased **plaque** (fatty buildup) in your arteries, which can slow or block the blood supply to your heart. There are 2 kinds of cholesterol: **low-density lipids (LDL)** and **high-density lipids (HDL)**. LDL causes plaque, while HDL helps reduce it. When you control your cholesterol, you are giving your arteries their best chance to stay clear of blockages.

Manage your blood sugar

If you have diabetes, it is important to keep your blood sugar levels in a healthy range to help prevent or delay serious health problems, such as heart disease.

Be active and exercise

Get active and exercise for 30-60 minutes on most days of the week. Be sure to talk with your provider before you start an exercise program. Here are links to some recommended exercise programs for you to try:

<p>American Heart Association (AHA) Walking Program www.heart.org/-/media/data-import/downloadables/6/1/6/walking-clubs-101-ucm_463348.pdf</p>	
<p>National Institutes of Health (NIH) Sample Walking Program www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/educational/healthdisp/pdf/tipsheets/Sample-Walking-Program.pdf</p>	

Exercise can help you:

- Reduce your risk of heart disease
- Manage your weight more easily
- Improve your cholesterol levels

- Lower your blood pressure
- Have more energy
- Reduce your stress levels

Manage your stress

Managing stress is a good idea for your overall health, and researchers are currently studying how managing stress can affect heart disease. Studies about psychosocial therapies (treatment involving both mental health and social support) show promise for preventing second heart attacks. After a heart attack or stroke, people who feel depressed, anxious, or overwhelmed by stress should talk with their provider or other healthcare professionals.

You can manage your stress with healthy habits, like some of these below:

- Talk with family and friends
- Ask for a referral to a mental health expert
- Do some physical activity (move around, walk, exercise) every day
- Focus on the things you are able to change
- Remember to laugh
- Try to get 7 or more hours of sleep a night
- Practice mindfulness or other meditations

Quit tobacco

Cigarette smokers have a higher risk of developing heart disease. If you smoke, vape, or use tobacco, quitting is the best thing you can do for your health.

Quitting tobacco has both short-term and long-term health benefits:

- In less than an hour after you quit, your blood pressure and circulation improves.
- In less than a day after quitting, your carbon monoxide levels drop as your oxygen levels increase.

- Within a few months after quitting, your lungs will start to clean themselves and your breathing will improve.
- In a few years after quitting, your risk of heart attack, stroke, and cancer will be lower.

Here are some first steps you can take to quit tobacco:

- Set a quit date (decide on a day when you will stop using tobacco).
- Throw away all your lighters, ashtrays, cigarettes, or other tobacco products.
- Tell your family and friends you plan to quit and ask for their support and encouragement.
- Consider nicotine replacement therapy (NRT) - such as nicotine patches, nicotine gum, or nicotine lozenges - or other medications like Wellbutrin® or Chantix® to help you quit.
- Change your environment. Make your car and home tobacco-free, avoid being around others who smoke, avoid places where you used to smoke, and avoid places where you'd buy tobacco.
- Stay active. Some ways to do this include:
 - Join a gym or work out with friends
 - Try something new, such as yoga
 - Explore museums or parks
 - Go on more outings with your family or friends
- Keep your hands busy. Some ways to do this include:
 - Color or draw
 - Build model cars
 - Garden
 - Knit, crochet, or do needlepoint
 - Jigsaw puzzles
 - Crossword puzzles

Get regular health check-ups

Regular health exams and tests can help you find problems before they start. Along with blood pressure check-ups and other heart health screenings, you should have your blood sugar level tested by the time you're 45 years old. This first test serves as a baseline for future tests, which you should have every 3 years.

Here are some other tests you should have:

- Weight and body mass index (BMI)
- Waist circumference (how wide your waist is)
- Blood pressure
- Cholesterol
- Heart exam
- Fasting blood glucose

If you have already been diagnosed with a heart condition, or if your medical history includes heart attack, stroke, or other cardiovascular events, your provider will ask you to do extra tests and get tests more often. Work closely with your healthcare provider to schedule appointments as needed.

How do I get started making these lifestyle changes?

Here are some easy strategies that can help you develop a lifestyle change plan that works for you:

- Start with just 1 or 2 small changes.
- Set specific goals (for example, instead of saying, "I will walk more," set a specific goal like, "I will walk 30 minutes every day").
- Ask for support from family or friends.
- Celebrate small wins and build in rewards for yourself to keep you going.

Any person can make these changes! Try them to see how they work for you.
Even small improvements to your health will make a big difference.

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