

ATRIAL FIBRILLATION

What is atrial fibrillation?

Atrial fibrillation (A'tre-al fib'rih-LA'shun) is a disorder found in about 2 million Americans. In it the two small upper chambers of the heart, the atria, quiver instead of beating effectively. Blood isn't pumped completely out of them, so it may pool and clot. **If a piece of the blood clot in the atria becomes lodged in an artery in the brain, a stroke results.** About 15 percent of strokes occur in people with atrial fibrillation.

How is atrial fibrillation treated?

Aspirin and warfarin are currently used. They interfere with blood clotting, thus helping to reduce stroke risk in people with atrial fibrillation. A nationwide study reported in December 1996 found that less than 40 percent of patients with atrial fibrillation were taking warfarin. Anticoagulants (an'tih-ko-AG'u-lants) are also given to people with atrial fibrillation.

AHA Recommendation

Treating atrial fibrillation is an important way to help prevent stroke. For this reason, the American Heart Association recommends aggressive treatment of this heart arrhythmia (ah-RITH'me-ah).

- A patient who has atrial fibrillation should be treated by his or her physician with some form of preventive medication.
- Aspirin and warfarin, the currently used medications, can have a major beneficial effect on public health in the United States.
- Physicians differ on the choice of drugs to prevent embolic (em-BOL'ik) stroke -- stroke caused by a blood clot. It's clear that warfarin is more effective against this type of stroke than aspirin. However, warfarin has side effects, especially in older patients.
- Warfarin in well-regulated doses that lead to a moderate interference with clotting is effective and appears safe in many patients.
- **Patients at high risk for stroke should probably be treated with warfarin rather than aspirin unless there are clear reasons not to. Examples include potential bleeding problems or ulcer. Patients over 75 should be monitored especially carefully.**

For stroke information, call the American Stroke Association at 1-888-4-STROKE. For information on life after stroke, ask for the Stroke Family Support Network.