Understanding Atrial Fibrillation (AFib)

This sheet can help you get a better understanding of AFib. You’ll learn the difference between heart rate and heart rhythm, and how AFib can affect your heart.

Here’s how the heart works normally

Think of the heart as a house with 4 rooms: the left atrium and the right atrium, and the left and right ventricles. For the blood to flow properly, the heart has to pump properly. This is controlled by the heart’s electrical activity.

When your heart is working the way it should, your heartbeat has a regular rhythm. The speed, or rate, of the heartbeat can change, but the rhythm—the constant “lub-dub” sound—is always the same. That means your heart is in normal rhythm, meaning you have a “regular” heartbeat. When your heartbeat is regular, your heart rate is an average of 60 to 80 beats per minute at rest.

Here’s what happens when you have AFib

When you have AFib, the electrical signal becomes confused, causing each atrium to quiver rapidly. This results in a very irregular and uneven heartbeat.

Because the left atrium and right atrium aren’t working correctly, the two ventricles start to pump before they have a chance to fill with the right amount of blood. Not enough blood is pumped out into your body, and not enough oxygen gets to your organs and cells.

Each time your heart goes out of rhythm, it is called an “AFib episode.” During an AFib episode, not only does the rhythm change, but the rate can get dangerously high—between 100 to 175 beats per minute at rest.
What kinds of AFib are there?

There are 3 kinds of AFib:

1. **Paroxysmal AFib**: Your heart goes in and out of normal rhythm. Episodes come and go on their own and last no longer than 1 week.

2. **Persistent AFib**: Your heart goes in and out of normal rhythm for more than a week and treatment is needed to restore it to normal rhythm.

3. **Permanent AFib**: Your heart’s rhythm is abnormal and does not return to normal rhythm, even with medical treatment.

AFib is a serious disease with serious consequences

AFib is a progressive disease which means it can get worse over time. The longer your heart is out of rhythm, the harder it is to restore normal rhythm. This is why it is so important to talk to your doctor. AFib may:

- **Mean more trips to the hospital**: Because of the risk of stroke and the effects of heart failure, people with AFib are more likely to be hospitalized compared with those who don’t have AFib.
- **Cause permanent heart damage**: AFib can enlarge 1 side of the heart muscle. This makes the heart work and move in a way it shouldn’t, which can damage heart tissue.
- **Increase your risk of stroke**: When blood does not flow smoothly through the heart some of it pools there, which can cause a blood clot to form. If the clot travels to the brain, it can block blood flow and cause a stroke.
- **Even lead to other diseases**: AFib is associated with other serious medical conditions including high blood pressure, diabetes, previous stroke or heart attack, and angina. AFib increases the risk of stroke or death when these conditions are also present.