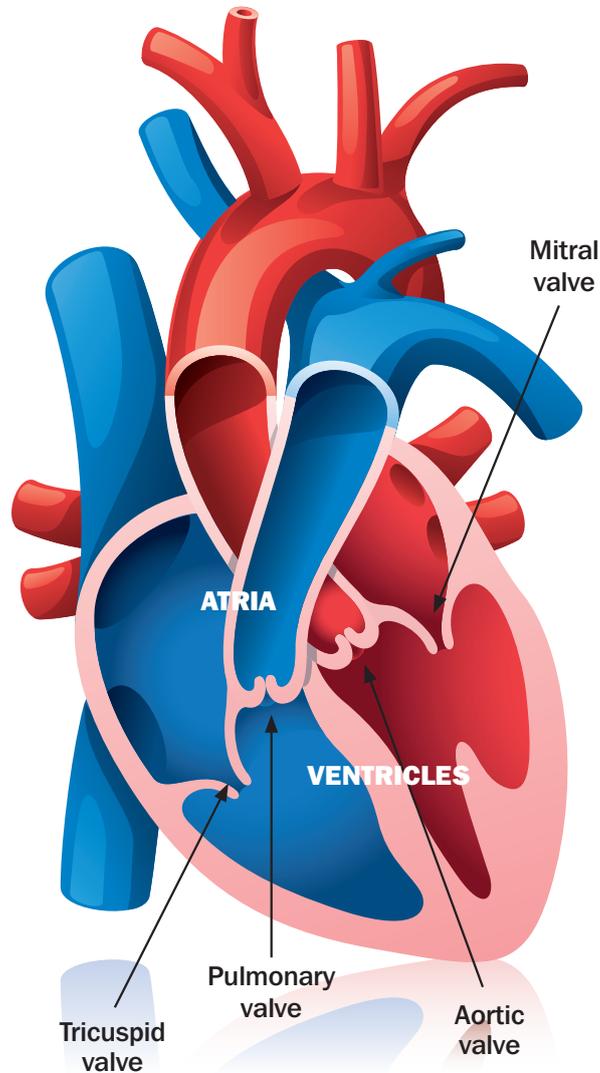


WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ATRIAL FIBRILLATION AND ATRIAL FLUTTER?

The term 'atrial flutter' is used to describe an unusually fast and irregular heart rhythm. The problem originates in the atria (the upper chambers of the heart) and is brought about by a fault in their electrical circuits. It usually shows itself in older people who have other cardiovascular complaints such as heart disease or high blood pressure. One of the most serious complications associated with the condition is stroke.

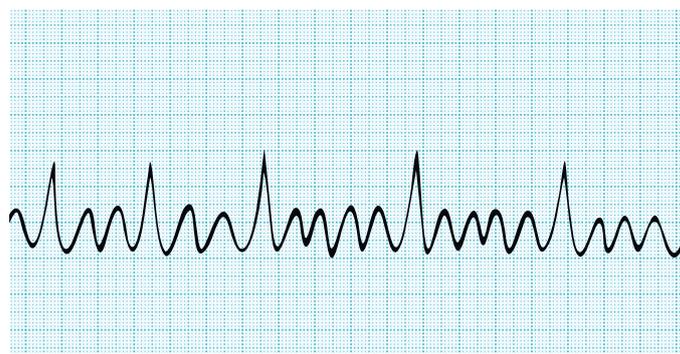
Atrial fibrillation is a similar condition but, the two conditions, although related, differ in a number of ways. Atrial flutter is less common and its symptoms can be less pronounced. The risk of stroke is normally lower than that associated with atrial fibrillation.

Atrial fibrillation causes the upper chambers of the heart, the atria, to quiver or fibrillate. This is normally felt as a fast and irregular heartbeat. This disrupts the normally smooth blood flow between the upper chambers (the atria) and the lower chambers (the ventricles) and can cause the blood to stagnate (pool) in the atria. If this blood forms into a clot it may break off and be carried round the blood stream into the brain causing a stroke. People with atrial fibrillation are five times more likely to have a stroke.



Atrial flutter is slightly different. While the heartbeat is irregular, it follows a certain rhythm and the atria are usually able to pump all the blood into the ventricles with every beat. This explains why the risk of stroke is lower.

ECG showing Atrial Fibrillation



TREATMENT

While atrial flutter is considered to be a chronic condition, it can disappear on its own, a lot more than atrial fibrillation does. As with atrial fibrillation, your doctor will try to treat the condition by controlling the heart's rhythm or trying to keep the heart rate at normal levels and prescribing anticoagulants to prevent stroke.

SYMPTOMS

- General fatigue
- Rapid and irregular heartbeat
- Fluttering or "thumping" in the chest
- Dizziness
- Shortness of breath and anxiety
- Weakness
- Faintness or confusion
- Fatigue when exercising
- Sweating

You may feel all or some of these symptoms. However some people do not experience any symptoms.

However, when it comes to prevention of atrial flutter or atrial fibrillation there are no differences whatsoever between the two conditions.

- Follow a heart-healthy diet
- Maintain a healthy weight
- Exercise regularly
- Stop smoking
- Drink alcohol in moderation

If you have symptoms or think something may be 'wrong' with your heart see your doctor. The later you leave it the more damage may be done to your heart and this can lead to a higher risk of stroke.