

Atrial Fibrillation and Anticoagulation Therapy

This leaflet offers information about atrial fibrillation for patients who have been advised that they need anticoagulation therapy. If you have any further questions or concerns, please speak to the staff member in charge of your care.

What is atrial fibrillation and why have I got it?

Atrial fibrillation (AF) is an irregular heartbeat which can last a few minutes or hours or can become permanent. The irregular heartbeat disturbs the blood flow in the chambers of the heart which can lead to blood clots (thrombi). Small pieces of blood clot may break off and could cause a stroke if they block a blood vessel in the brain.

About one in ten people over 60 years of age is affected by AF.

Atrial fibrillation may be caused by:

- rheumatic heart disease
- congestive heart failure
- coronary artery disease
- cardiomyopathy (a general term for diseases of the heart muscle)
- hypertension
- diabetes
- overactive thyroid
- excess alcohol and caffeine.

Sometimes we can find no cause for AF.

What are the signs and symptoms?

Some people have no symptoms and may not know they are in AF while others may feel tired, short of breath, dizzy or have palpitations.

Do I need any tests to confirm the diagnosis?

AF is usually diagnosed by your GP, a cardiologist or a doctor treating you for another condition. It is confirmed by doing an electrocardiogram (ECG).

What treatments are available?

You may start medication to control your heart rate and / or rhythm. You may also start medication to reduce the risk of blood clots. This is called anticoagulation and it does not treat the AF itself. Anticoagulation slows down the blood clotting process to make it less likely to form a clot in the heart which may then travel to the brain and cause a stroke.

Warfarin, rivaroxaban, dabigatran, apixaban and edoxaban are oral anticoagulants used for stroke prevention for patients with AF. If you are under 60 and have lone AF, your risk of having a stroke is much lower so anticoagulation is not usually needed.

You may be offered one of the following:

- cardioversion, whereby the heart is given a controlled electric shock to restore a normal rhythm.
- catheter ablation, a procedure whereby a small wire is guided through a vein to your heart. A high-frequency radio wave is used to generate heat and destroy the diseased area of the heart causing abnormal electrical circuits.

If you undergo either of these procedures, you will need to have

anticoagulation medication for at least one month beforehand. This will reduce the risk of new blood clots forming (and is also the treatment for blood clots if they should occur). Anticoagulation duration will be reviewed after the procedure by your cardiology team. This follow up appointment is usually around three- six months after the procedure to assess its effectiveness. Some people may remain on anticoagulation indefinitely depending on the risk of stroke. If you go back into AF before your planned follow up, please contact the Arrhythmia team.

What happens if I do not get treatment?

Taking anticoagulation reduces the risk of a stroke by up to 70 per cent. Anticoagulants have been shown to be more effective at reducing strokes than aspirin which is no longer recommended.

Are there any side effects?

One to two per cent of patients on anticoagulants may have a serious bleeding episode each year. Your anticoagulation clinic will give you advice about what to do if bleeding occurs. The risk of bleeding is outweighed by the benefit of stroke prevention if anticoagulation is prescribed for you.

How do I take the medicine?

If you take warfarin for AF, you will need regular blood tests to check your international normalised ratio (INR). We aim to keep this between 2 and 3, which means that your blood will take two to three times longer to clot than normal.

Your warfarin dose will be changed according to your INR so you will need a blood test once or twice a week at first until your warfarin dose is stable. The time between your tests may be increased if you are stable.. For more information about warfarin please refer to your yellow anticoagulation record book.

Please be aware if you have commenced warfarin prior to the cardiology procedures described above, you will need weekly INR testing for the four weeks leading up to your procedure date. It will be important that the INR levels remains above 2 or your procedure may need to be postponed until the required level is achieved.

For people starting rivaroxaban you will take one tablet daily with food. Edoxaban is also taken once daily but can be taken with or without food.

For patients taking dabigatran or apixaban you will take one tablet twice a day, with or without food.

The doses of rivaroxaban, edoxaban, dabigatran and apixaban do not change and you do not need regular blood tests as INR monitoring is not needed.

Is there anything else I need to know?

If you are taking an antiplatelet (e.g., aspirin, clopidogrel) prior to starting anticoagulation, you will be advised whether this is to continue or to stop by your cardiologist. If you have not been given this information, please check with your cardiologist. You should take all your other medications as directed by your prescribing doctor.

What is the initiation process of anticoagulation at St George's Hospital?

If you have been diagnosed with AF in the Emergency Department and require anticoagulant medication, you will be booked into the first available appointment within a week. You will be seen by the Specialist Anticoagulation Pharmacist who will discuss available treatment options and start you on anticoagulant medication.

If you do start on warfarin you will be given an initial supply and then it is your responsibility to request further supply from your GP. You will be issued with an anticoagulation record book, where your dose of warfarin and next appointment will be recorded. You can request to have regular follow up appointments at St George's Hospital to monitor your INR. Alternatively, you may be able to switch to using our open access anticoagulation clinics which have a more flexible appointment system, once your anticoagulation is stable.

You may also be monitored by your GP or at your local hospital

If you are started on rivaroxaban, dabigatran, apixaban or edoxaban, you will receive a supply from St George's Hospital and will then need to get further supplies from your GP. You will also be asked to attend a follow up appointment to review your anticoagulation and if suitable you will then be discharged to your GP.

You will be able to ask any questions you may have about anticoagulation in your appointments.

Useful sources of information

NHS Conditions: www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Atrial-fibrillation

Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns about your anticoagulation therapy, please contact the anticoagulant team on 020 8725 5443 (Monday to Friday, 9am to 4pm). Out of hours, please contact the switchboard on 020 8672 1255 and ask for the haematology specialist registrar on call.

If your warfarin treatment is to be monitored at another hospital please seek advice from your own anticoagulation clinic.

For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit www.stgeorges.nhs.uk

Additional services

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

PALS can offer you on-the-spot advice and information when you have comments or concerns about our services or the care you have received. You can visit the PALS office between 9.30am and 4.30pm, Monday to Friday in the main corridor between Grosvenor and Lanesborough wings (near the lift foyer).

Tel: 020 8725 2453 **Email:** pals@stgeorges.nhs.uk

NHS Choices

NHS Choices provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make decisions about your health.

Web: www.nhs.uk

NHS 111

You can call 111 when you need medical help fast but it's not a 999 emergency. NHS 111 is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Calls are free from landlines and mobile phones.

Tel: 111

AccessAble

You can download accessibility guides for all our services by searching 'St George's Hospital' on the AccessAble website (www.accessable.co.uk). The guides are designed to ensure everyone – including those with accessibility needs – can access our hospital and community sites with confidence.



Reference: AAE_AAF_LP_03 Published: April 2024 Review date: April 2026