Atrial Fibrillation

Atrial fibrillation is a clinical condition characterised by an irregular heartbeat. The upper chamber of the heart, called the atrium beats irregularly, and as a result, the lower part of the heart i.e the ventricles also beats at a fast rate.

In most cases of atrial fibrillation, especially in young individuals, the cause is not known. However, in older individuals, it can be due to high blood pressure or high alcohol intake. It is also seen in patients with heart failure.

Patients who have atrial fibrillation may not necessarily realise they have it till it is found incidentally on a routine health check up. However, some patients may complain of increasing breathlessness or sometimes dizziness.

Diagnosis is made by an ECG which shows an irregularly irregular rate and rhythm. Echocardiography may also be performed, along with some blood tests such as haemoglobin and thyroid function.

The aims of treatment are two-fold – to control the rate or rhythm, and to prevent stroke. Drugs such as beta blockers, amiodarone, flecainide and calcium channel blockers are effective. Blood thinning agents such as aspirin, clopidogrel or warfarin may be required, as patients with atrial fibrillation are at risk of stroke.