



Kareem Abdul-Jabbar

speaks out about heart health



Basketball legend promotes timely detection of atrial fibrillation

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar is a master of rebounds. On the basketball court, the six-time NBA Most Valuable Player's offense made history. But two years ago, he faced a new kind of opponent: atrial fibrillation, or AFib. This common form of heart arrhythmia (an abnormal heart rhythm) can lead to serious and potentially fatal health conditions.

Thanks to a timely diagnosis and a doctor's treatment plan, Abdul-Jabbar is bouncing back. He spoke to NIH MedlinePlus Magazine about his experience and why he advocates for regular health screenings.

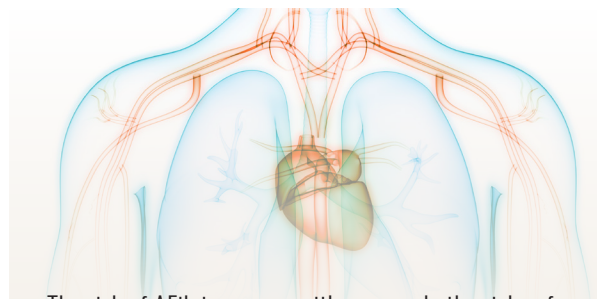
Tell us about your diagnosis with atrial fibrillation.

When I first started to experience shortness of breath, fatigue, and lightheadedness, I dismissed the symptoms because they would come and go. I assumed they were signs of aging. But I was wrong. Over time, I experienced the symptoms more frequently, and they would interfere with activities that didn't cause me any problems before, like walking through an airport.

In 2021, I was leaving a Los Angeles Dodgers game and could not stand up without feeling so lightheaded that I thought I would collapse. I was eventually diagnosed with atrial fibrillation after my symptoms sent me to the hospital.

What was your reaction when you received the diagnosis?

I was surprised because before my diagnosis, I didn't know what AFib was. I've since learned that AFib is the most common type of irregular heart rhythm that prevents your heart's lower chambers from filling completely or pumping enough blood. Blood can pool in your heart, which increases your risk of forming blood clots and



The risk of AFib increases with age, as do the risks of other chronic heart conditions such as hypertension, coronary artery disease, and heart failure. AFib can also increase the risk of stroke. The number of strokes attributable to AFib increases from **1.5% in people ages 50 to 59 to more than 23% in people ages 80 and older**. Your risk of stroke and heart-related complications can be greatly reduced with proper treatment. If you have risk factors for AFib or stroke, it's important to have a health care professional follow your condition.

SOURCE: [NATIONAL HEART, LUNG, AND BLOOD INSTITUTE](https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health-topics/atrial-fibrillation)

can lead to stroke and other heart-related complications. In fact, people with AFib are at about a five times greater risk of stroke [compared to the general population].

I also had to accept that I cannot do everything I did before. It's scary knowing that AFib increases your risk of stroke, but that's why it is so important to take your symptoms seriously and to speak with a health care professional.

What do you do to maintain your heart health and overall wellness?

Being diagnosed with AFib has changed my life in a big way. I have to closely follow the regimen provided by my doctors and make sure I stay on top of my medications and appointments. Because of my AFib diagnosis, I pay much closer attention to my health than I did before.

“Seeking medical attention early may help reduce the risk of AFib contributing to a more serious condition such as stroke.”

Why did you begin speaking up about your personal health challenges, and why do you advocate for addressing health disparities?

Black Americans are diagnosed with AFib at lower rates than White Americans. This is despite the fact that Black Americans are at a disproportionately higher risk for the health conditions that increase the risk for AFib. What’s more, Black Americans with AFib are also at a significantly higher risk of stroke compared to White Americans with AFib. This shows why diagnosis and treatment are important.

I’m teaming up with Bristol Myers Squibb and Pfizer for the *No Time to Wait* campaign* to help raise awareness of AFib and its symptoms. We want everyone, but especially Black Americans, to learn more about the symptoms of AFib and the increased risk of AFib-related stroke.

What is your advice to others about AFib and getting regular check-ups and health screenings?

It is crucial to listen to your body and pay attention to your symptoms. If you experience an irregular heartbeat, heart racing, chest pain, shortness of breath, fatigue, or lightheadedness, it’s important to discuss it with a health care professional. Only they can determine whether the symptoms indicate AFib or another medical condition. Seeking medical attention early may help reduce the risk of AFib contributing to a more serious condition such as stroke. You need to do what’s best for you and your health, now.



Kareem Abdul-Jabbar played in the NBA for 20 years and, upon retiring in 1989, was the league’s highest career scorer.

I know firsthand the impact AFib can have on your life, and I can’t stress enough how important it is to learn about the symptoms and talk to your health care professional.

What are your goals for raising awareness about AFib?

More than 2 million people in the United States have AFib, and that is estimated to increase to 12 million by 2030. However, many people ignore their symptoms because they can come and go. Since many people in the United States may have AFib but remain undiagnosed, I want to encourage others to speak with a health care professional if they experience symptoms. ■

**NIH was not involved in the creation of the project, and reference to it does not constitute or imply endorsement by any federal agency.*



FAST FACT: Atrial fibrillation, also known as AFib or AF, affects **more than 2 million adults** in the United States and is one of the most common types of arrhythmias (irregular heart rhythms). The risk of developing AFib increases with age, so as the average age in the United States increases, more people will be affected by this condition.

SOURCE: [NATIONAL HEART, LUNG, AND BLOOD INSTITUTE](#)