

Contemporary Treatment of Atrial Fibrillation

Manuel Alejandro Ortega Villegas¹, Héctor Ramírez Rangel², Zeus Bryan Duarte Jacobo³, Raúl Gutiérrez Ledesma⁴, Alejandro Hernández Castillo⁵, Diego Eduardo Medinilla Guijarro⁶

^{1,2,3,4,5,6}Hospital General Celaya

ABSTRACT

Atrial fibrillation is the most common sustained cardiac arrhythmia and is associated with stroke, heart failure, impaired quality of life, hospitalization, and increased mortality. Contemporary treatment has shifted from a predominantly rate-control strategy toward earlier rhythm control in appropriately selected patients. Catheter ablation has become an established and increasingly first-line treatment for symptomatic paroxysmal atrial fibrillation and selected patients with persistent atrial fibrillation. Randomized evidence demonstrates lower arrhythmia recurrence and fewer hospitalizations with ablation compared with antiarrhythmic drug therapy in many symptomatic patients. Pulsed field ablation represents the most important recent procedural innovation because it uses nonthermal electroporation to produce myocardial lesions while potentially limiting collateral injury to the esophagus, phrenic nerve, and pulmonary veins. Cryoballoon and radiofrequency ablation remain established technologies, while hybrid epicardial–endocardial approaches and substrate-based strategies are being explored for persistent and long-standing persistent disease. Anticoagulation, stroke-risk assessment, left atrial appendage occlusion, and aggressive management of modifiable risk factors remain essential components of care regardless of rhythm-control strategy. Novel pharmacologic approaches targeting atrial ion channels, fibrosis, inflammation, microRNAs, and atrial-specific electrophysiology remain investigational. This review summarizes the contemporary management of atrial fibrillation, emphasizing early rhythm control, catheter ablation, pulsed field ablation, anticoagulation, risk-factor modification, and emerging therapies.

KEYWORDS: atrial fibrillation; catheter ablation; pulsed field ablation; rhythm control; anticoagulation; pulmonary vein isolation; antiarrhythmic drugs; left atrial appendage occlusion.

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INTRODUCTION

Atrial fibrillation is a supraventricular tachyarrhythmia characterized by disorganized atrial electrical activity and ineffective atrial contraction. Its clinical consequences extend beyond palpitations and exercise intolerance, as atrial fibrillation increases the risk of thromboembolic stroke, heart failure, hospitalization, cognitive decline, and death.

Management traditionally relied on three fundamental components: stroke prevention, ventricular rate control, and rhythm control. More recent evidence has shifted the therapeutic paradigm toward earlier rhythm-control intervention in symptomatic patients and in selected individuals with cardiovascular comorbidities. Catheter ablation has become a central therapeutic option rather than a

treatment reserved exclusively for patients who fail multiple antiarrhythmic drugs [1,2].

The newest advances are primarily procedural rather than pharmacologic. Pulsed field ablation has emerged as a nonthermal method designed to selectively ablate atrial myocardium while reducing injury to adjacent structures [3]. At the same time, contemporary guidelines increasingly emphasize integrated care, including anticoagulation, treatment of obesity and sleep apnea, blood pressure control, reduction of alcohol intake, and management of heart failure [1].

METHODS

This narrative review was developed from the provided literature synthesis on contemporary atrial fibrillation

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treatment. The evidence included clinical practice guidelines, expert consensus statements, randomized trials, systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and mechanistic reviews addressing catheter ablation, pulsed field ablation, antiarrhythmic drugs, atrial fibrillation burden, left atrial appendage management, and emerging pharmacologic therapies.

References are presented numerically according to their first appearance in the manuscript.

Treatment Goals

The principal objectives of atrial fibrillation treatment are:

Prevention of stroke and systemic embolism.

Improvement of symptoms and quality of life.

Prevention or reversal of tachycardia-mediated cardiomyopathy.

Reduction of atrial fibrillation burden.

Prevention of heart failure hospitalization.

Optimization of cardiovascular risk factors.

Reduction of treatment-related complications.

Successful management requires individualized assessment of atrial fibrillation type, symptom burden, left ventricular function, stroke risk, bleeding risk, atrial size, comorbidities, frailty, and patient preferences.

Stroke Prevention

Stroke prevention remains the most important prognostic component of atrial fibrillation management. The need for oral anticoagulation is determined by validated thromboembolic risk assessment rather than by whether the patient is in sinus rhythm at a particular moment.

Direct oral anticoagulants are generally preferred over vitamin K antagonists in eligible patients because they provide predictable anticoagulation and reduce intracranial bleeding risk. Vitamin K antagonists remain necessary in patients with mechanical heart valves and selected cases of rheumatic mitral stenosis.

Successful catheter ablation does not automatically eliminate the need for anticoagulation. Long-term anticoagulation decisions should continue to be based on thromboembolic risk because asymptomatic recurrence may occur and stroke risk may persist despite apparent rhythm control [1].

Rate Control

Rate control remains appropriate for patients with mild symptoms, permanent atrial fibrillation, advanced age, substantial comorbidity, or limited likelihood of durable sinus rhythm restoration. Common agents include beta-blockers, nondihydropyridine calcium-channel blockers, and digoxin.

The choice depends on left ventricular function, resting and exertional heart rate, blood pressure, and associated disease. Nondihydropyridine calcium-channel blockers are generally avoided in patients with reduced left ventricular systolic function. Digoxin may be useful in sedentary patients or those with heart failure but is often insufficient during exertion.

Atrioventricular node ablation with permanent pacing may be considered when pharmacologic rate control fails and rhythm-control strategies are unsuitable or unsuccessful. This

approach controls ventricular rate but does not eliminate atrial fibrillation or thromboembolic risk.

Early Rhythm Control

Rhythm control aims to restore and maintain sinus rhythm through cardioversion, antiarrhythmic drugs, catheter ablation, or surgical approaches. Contemporary management increasingly supports earlier rhythm-control intervention rather than waiting for progressive atrial remodeling and repeated treatment failure.

Early rhythm control may reduce atrial fibrillation burden, improve symptoms, preserve ventricular function, and potentially reduce cardiovascular complications in selected patients. The likelihood of success is generally higher when intervention occurs before extensive atrial dilation, fibrosis, and long-standing persistent disease.

Rhythm control is particularly relevant in patients with:

Symptomatic atrial fibrillation

First or early episodes

Paroxysmal atrial fibrillation

Tachycardia-mediated cardiomyopathy

Heart failure potentially worsened by atrial fibrillation

Difficulty achieving adequate rate control

Strong preference for restoration of sinus rhythm

Antiarrhythmic Drug Therapy

Antiarrhythmic drugs remain an important treatment option when catheter ablation is unavailable, contraindicated, declined, or not yet indicated. Their use must be tailored to structural heart disease, coronary artery disease, ventricular function, renal function, and proarrhythmic risk.

Drug therapy has moderate efficacy and may be limited by adverse effects, organ toxicity, bradycardia, QT prolongation, ventricular arrhythmia, and recurrence [4,5]. Class Ic drugs may be considered in patients without significant structural heart disease, while amiodarone is effective but associated with pulmonary, thyroid, hepatic, ocular, and neurologic toxicity.

In patients with heart failure, the selection of antiarrhythmic drugs is particularly restricted. This limitation has contributed to the growing role of catheter ablation in patients with atrial fibrillation and impaired ventricular function [6].

Electrical Cardioversion

Electrical cardioversion is highly effective for acute restoration of sinus rhythm. It may be used in hemodynamically unstable patients, symptomatic persistent atrial fibrillation, or before initiation of a long-term rhythm-control strategy.

Appropriate anticoagulation is essential when atrial fibrillation has persisted for more than 48 hours or when duration is uncertain. A transesophageal echocardiography-guided strategy may be used to exclude left atrial appendage thrombus and permit earlier cardioversion.

Cardioversion alone does not prevent recurrence. Long-term maintenance usually requires antiarrhythmic therapy, catheter ablation, or aggressive treatment of underlying risk factors.

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Catheter Ablation

Catheter ablation is an established rhythm-control therapy that primarily targets electrical triggers originating from the pulmonary veins. Pulmonary vein isolation remains the cornerstone of most ablation procedures.

Meta-analytic evidence indicates that catheter ablation reduces atrial arrhythmia recurrence and hospitalization more effectively than antiarrhythmic drug therapy in many patients with paroxysmal or persistent atrial fibrillation [2]. In first-line randomized studies, catheter ablation also improved freedom from recurrent atrial arrhythmia and quality of life without a major increase in serious adverse events [7,8].

Catheter ablation is especially appropriate for:

Symptomatic paroxysmal atrial fibrillation

Symptomatic persistent atrial fibrillation

Failure or intolerance of antiarrhythmic drugs

Patient preference for nonpharmacologic rhythm control

Atrial fibrillation-mediated cardiomyopathy

Selected patients with heart failure

Recurrent atrial fibrillation despite cardioversion

Potential complications include vascular injury, pericardial effusion, cardiac tamponade, thromboembolism, pulmonary vein stenosis, phrenic nerve injury, esophageal injury, and atrioesophageal fistula. Although serious complications are uncommon, the procedure should be performed in experienced centers with appropriate monitoring and emergency support [2,9].

Radiofrequency Ablation

Radiofrequency ablation produces thermal injury through resistive heating. It allows point-by-point lesion creation and remains one of the most established methods for pulmonary vein isolation.

Its advantages include flexibility, extensive operator experience, and the ability to perform additional substrate modification when required. Limitations include procedure duration, dependence on lesion continuity, and risk of thermal injury to surrounding structures.

Contemporary systems use contact-force sensing, lesion indices, electroanatomic mapping, and temperature monitoring to improve lesion quality and safety.

Cryoballoon Ablation

Cryoballoon ablation produces tissue injury by freezing at the pulmonary vein antra. It offers a relatively standardized single-shot approach and is widely used in paroxysmal atrial fibrillation.

First-line trials have shown higher freedom from atrial arrhythmia with cryoballoon ablation compared with antiarrhythmic drugs, with similar rates of serious adverse events [7]. Potential complications include phrenic nerve injury, vascular complications, and rare pulmonary vein stenosis.

Cryoballoon ablation is particularly suitable when pulmonary vein isolation is the principal procedural objective.

Pulsed Field Ablation

Pulsed field ablation is the most important recent technological development in atrial fibrillation ablation. It delivers high-voltage electrical pulses that produce irreversible electroporation of myocardial cell membranes.

Unlike radiofrequency and cryothermal ablation, pulsed field ablation is nonthermal. Its proposed advantage is relative myocardial selectivity, potentially reducing collateral injury to the esophagus, pulmonary veins, and phrenic nerve [3,10]. Early studies demonstrate high rates of acute pulmonary vein isolation, short procedural times, and favorable safety profiles. Reported arrhythmia-free survival appears broadly comparable with established technologies, although long-term randomized comparisons remain necessary [3].

Potential advantages include:

Rapid lesion creation

Reduced thermal injury

Lower theoretical risk of atrioesophageal fistula

Reduced pulmonary vein stenosis

Simplified pulmonary vein isolation

Shorter procedural duration

Important unresolved questions include lesion durability, long-term recurrence, effectiveness in persistent atrial fibrillation, comparative cost, and outcomes outside highly experienced centers.

Persistent and Long-Standing Persistent Atrial Fibrillation

Outcomes after pulmonary vein isolation are less predictable in persistent and long-standing persistent atrial fibrillation because disease maintenance may involve atrial fibrosis, nonpulmonary vein triggers, conduction heterogeneity, and complex substrate abnormalities.

Additional strategies have included:

Posterior wall isolation

Linear lesions

Complex fractionated electrogram ablation

Low-voltage substrate modification

Nonpulmonary vein trigger ablation

Vein of Marshall ethanol infusion

Left atrial appendage isolation

Hybrid epicardial–endocardial ablation

However, no universal adjunctive strategy has consistently demonstrated superiority. Pulmonary vein isolation remains the foundation, and additional ablation should be individualized according to anatomy, recurrence mechanism, electrophysiologic findings, and operator experience [9,10].

Hybrid and Surgical Ablation

Hybrid ablation combines thoracoscopic epicardial lesion creation with endocardial catheter mapping and ablation. It is being explored for persistent or long-standing persistent atrial fibrillation, particularly when previous catheter ablation has failed.

Surgical ablation may be performed concomitantly during cardiac surgery or as a stand-alone procedure. The Cox maze procedure remains the most comprehensive surgical lesion set and can achieve durable rhythm control, but it is more invasive than catheter ablation.

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Potential candidates include patients undergoing mitral or other cardiac surgery, those with markedly enlarged atria, and selected patients with refractory persistent atrial fibrillation [1,10].

Left Atrial Appendage Occlusion

The left atrial appendage is the principal source of thrombus in nonvalvular atrial fibrillation. Percutaneous or surgical left atrial appendage occlusion may be considered in patients at increased stroke risk who have contraindications to long-term oral anticoagulation.

Left atrial appendage occlusion is not primarily a rhythm-control procedure. Its purpose is reduction of thromboembolic risk. Short-term antithrombotic treatment is usually still required after implantation.

Surgical appendage exclusion may be performed during open cardiac surgery or selected thoroscopic procedures. The decision should be individualized according to stroke risk, bleeding history, anatomy, and feasibility of anticoagulation.

Risk-Factor Modification

Risk-factor modification is now considered an essential component of atrial fibrillation treatment rather than an optional adjunct. Important targets include:

Obesity

Obstructive sleep apnea

Hypertension

Diabetes mellitus

Excess alcohol consumption

Physical inactivity

Smoking

Heart failure

Dyslipidemia

Weight reduction, treatment of sleep apnea, exercise, blood pressure control, and alcohol reduction can decrease atrial fibrillation burden and improve ablation outcomes.

Failure to address these factors may promote ongoing atrial remodeling and increase recurrence despite technically successful ablation.

Atrial Fibrillation Burden

Atrial fibrillation burden refers to the percentage of monitored time spent in atrial fibrillation. It is increasingly recognized as a clinically relevant outcome beyond the simple presence or absence of recurrence.

Reduction in atrial fibrillation burden may improve symptoms and may correlate with lower risk of heart failure and stroke, although the precise burden threshold associated with clinical benefit remains uncertain [11].

Continuous monitoring through implantable devices, wearable technology, and smartwatches may improve detection of recurrence and allow more individualized treatment.

Emerging Pharmacologic Therapies

Despite major advances in ablation, pharmacologic innovation remains limited. Current investigational strategies aim to produce atrial-selective effects or modify the structural substrate that sustains atrial fibrillation.

Potential targets include:

TASK-1 potassium channels

Small-conductance calcium-activated potassium channels

Atrial-selective sodium channels

Fibrosis pathways

Inflammatory signaling

Oxidative stress

MicroRNA regulation

Nanoparticle-mediated drug delivery

TASK-1 inhibition is particularly attractive because TASK-1 expression is increased in some forms of atrial fibrillation and may contribute to atrial electrical remodeling [5]. However, these therapies remain experimental and have not replaced established antiarrhythmic drugs or catheter ablation.

Antifibrotic therapies are also being studied because atrial fibrosis contributes to conduction heterogeneity and treatment failure. Translation into clinical practice remains challenging because fibrosis is multifactorial and difficult to measure reliably [12].

Proposed Treatment Algorithm

A practical approach to contemporary atrial fibrillation management includes:

Confirm the diagnosis: document atrial fibrillation with electrocardiography or validated rhythm monitoring.

Assess clinical stability: perform urgent cardioversion if hemodynamic instability is present.

Evaluate stroke risk: initiate anticoagulation when indicated.

Treat underlying disease: address heart failure, hypertension, ischemia, valvular disease, thyroid dysfunction, and sleep apnea.

Choose rate or rhythm control: base the decision on symptoms, age, atrial fibrillation duration, ventricular function, and patient preference.

Consider early rhythm control: particularly in symptomatic, recently diagnosed, or heart-failure-associated atrial fibrillation.

Select rhythm-control modality: antiarrhythmic drugs, cardioversion, or catheter ablation.

Consider first-line ablation: especially for symptomatic paroxysmal atrial fibrillation.

Select ablation technology: radiofrequency, cryoballoon, or pulsed field ablation according to expertise and anatomy.

Continue risk-factor modification: optimize weight, blood pressure, sleep apnea, alcohol intake, and physical activity.

Monitor recurrence and burden: use symptoms, electrocardiography, ambulatory monitoring, or implantable devices.

Reassess anticoagulation independently of rhythm outcome: do not discontinue solely because sinus rhythm is restored.

DISCUSSION

The contemporary treatment of atrial fibrillation is characterized by a shift toward earlier rhythm control and broader use of catheter ablation. Randomized evidence consistently demonstrates lower recurrence with ablation than

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with antiarrhythmic drug therapy in many symptomatic patients [2,8].

The most important new procedural development is pulsed field ablation. Its nonthermal mechanism may reduce injury to structures that limit conventional thermal ablation. However, early enthusiasm must be balanced against the need for durable long-term comparative data.

Antiarrhythmic drug therapy remains clinically important, but its limitations include modest efficacy, proarrhythmia, and extracardiac toxicity. Novel drugs targeting atrial-specific ion channels and fibrosis are scientifically promising but remain investigational.

The success of any rhythm-control strategy depends on comprehensive care. Anticoagulation, weight management, sleep apnea treatment, blood pressure control, and heart failure optimization remain essential. Catheter ablation should not be viewed as an isolated procedure but as one

component of an integrated atrial fibrillation treatment program.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary atrial fibrillation management increasingly favors early rhythm control and catheter ablation in appropriately selected symptomatic patients. Pulmonary vein isolation remains the foundation of ablation, while pulsed field ablation represents the principal recent technological advance. Radiofrequency and cryoballoon ablation remain established and effective options. Persistent atrial fibrillation continues to present therapeutic challenges, and hybrid or substrate-based procedures may be considered in selected patients. Anticoagulation, left atrial appendage management, and aggressive risk-factor modification remain essential regardless of rhythm-control success. Novel ion-channel and antifibrotic drugs remain promising but are not yet standard treatment.

Table 1. Contemporary Treatment Options for Atrial Fibrillation

Treatment strategy	Principal indication	Main advantages	Important limitations
Rate-control therapy	Mild symptoms, permanent AF, advanced age, limited rhythm-control benefit	Noninvasive, widely available, controls ventricular response	Does not restore sinus rhythm or eliminate stroke risk
Antiarrhythmic drug therapy	Symptomatic patients unsuitable for or not choosing ablation	Avoids invasive procedure, useful after cardioversion	Moderate efficacy, proarrhythmia, organ toxicity
Electrical cardioversion	Hemodynamic instability or symptomatic persistent AF	Rapid restoration of sinus rhythm	High recurrence without maintenance strategy
Radiofrequency ablation	Symptomatic paroxysmal or persistent AF	Flexible lesion creation, established long-term evidence	Thermal collateral injury and procedural complexity
Cryoballoon ablation	Primarily paroxysmal AF requiring pulmonary vein isolation	Standardized single-shot technique, effective first-line option	Phrenic nerve injury and limited substrate modification
Pulsed field ablation	Pulmonary vein isolation using nonthermal energy	Rapid lesions and potential tissue selectivity	Limited long-term randomized comparative evidence
Hybrid ablation	Persistent or long-standing persistent AF, failed catheter ablation	Combines epicardial and endocardial treatment	Greater invasiveness and procedural complexity
Surgical maze procedure	Concomitant cardiac surgery or refractory AF	Durable comprehensive lesion set	Invasive and generally reserved for selected patients
Left atrial appendage occlusion	Stroke risk with contraindication to long-term anticoagulation	Reduces dependence on chronic anticoagulation	Procedural risk and need for short-term antithrombotic therapy
Risk-factor modification	All patients with AF	Reduces burden and improves rhythm-control outcomes	Requires sustained adherence and multidisciplinary care
Experimental atrial-selective or antifibrotic drugs	Investigational use	Potential mechanism-based therapy	Not established for routine clinical care

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