TOE Before Cardioversion: Essential Stroke Prevention in Atrial Fibrillation

Transoesophageal echocardiography identifies hidden clots before cardioversion, preventing stroke from atrial paresis when normal rhythm returns.

Dr Edward Leatham · Consultant Cardiologist · Surrey Cardiovascular Clinic · April 2026

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When cardioverting atrial fibrillation, the greatest stroke risk comes not from existing clots, but from atrial paresis following rhythm restoration. TOE remains crucial for detecting left atrial appendage thrombus that transthoracic echo cannot visualise reliably.

Background

Atrial fibrillation affects over 1.4 million people in the UK, with cardioversion offering rapid symptom relief and rhythm restoration. However, the procedure carries significant stroke risk, particularly in the hours following successful conversion to sinus rhythm.

The left atrial appendage — a finger-like pouch extending from the left atrium — represents the primary site of thrombus formation in atrial fibrillation. This anatomical structure, with its complex trabeculated interior, creates perfect conditions for blood stasis and clot development when atrial contraction becomes chaotic.

Standard transthoracic echocardiography cannot adequately visualise the left atrial appendage due to its posterior location and acoustic shadowing from lung tissue.

The Mechanism: Atrial Stunning

The counterintuitive reality of cardioversion stroke risk lies in what happens after successful rhythm restoration. When AF terminates — whether electrically, pharmacologically, or spontaneously — the electrical restoration of P waves precedes mechanical recovery of atrial contraction by hours to days.

During this period of "atrial stunning," the left atrial appendage remains mechanically paralysed despite apparently normal electrical activity. Any thrombus within the LAA is at maximum risk of embolisation precisely as the patient appears to have successfully cardioverted — a critical window that is easily missed.

This explains why anticoagulation must cover not just the cardioversion itself but the weeks following, until mechanical atrial function has fully recovered.

The Role of TOE

Transoesophageal echocardiography provides direct, high-resolution visualisation of the left atrial appendage from the oesophagus, which lies immediately posterior to the left atrium. This anatomical proximity eliminates the acoustic barriers that limit transthoracic imaging.

TOE detects LAA thrombus with sensitivity exceeding 95% and specificity above 99%. The ACUTE trial demonstrated that TOE-guided cardioversion with short-term anticoagulation was non-inferior to the conventional 3-week anticoagulation strategy, enabling earlier cardioversion in suitable patients without increased stroke risk.

Current guidelines support TOE-guided cardioversion when AF duration exceeds 48 hours or is unknown, and when earlier cardioversion is clinically indicated.

When to Refer

Urgent referral (same day): haemodynamically unstable AF requiring cardioversion; AF with rapid ventricular response unresponsive to rate control.

Routine referral: symptomatic AF where rhythm control is preferred strategy; patients with AF duration >48 hours requiring cardioversion; newly diagnosed AF for risk stratification and management planning.

Key Takeaways

1. The greatest stroke risk from cardioversion occurs after successful rhythm restoration, not during AF.

2. TOE detects LAA thrombus that transthoracic echo misses — essential before cardioversion when AF >48 hours.

3. Anticoagulation must continue post-cardioversion until mechanical atrial function recovers.

4. Any patient discharged in AF requires anticoagulation regardless of CHA_2DS_2-VASc score.

50-Word Blog Excerpt

Cardioverting atrial fibrillation carries stroke risk that peaks after — not during — the procedure. The left atrial appendage harbours clots invisible to standard echo. TOE identifies these before cardioversion, while anticoagulation must continue until atrial mechanical function fully recovers.

Read more: **www.scvc.co.uk/heart-rhythm-problems/toe-cardioversion-stroke-prevention/** · Surrey Cardiovascular Clinic: **scvc.co.uk** · VAT Trap: **vat-trap.com**