












ORIGINAL RESEARCH

# Atrial Fibrillation, Heart Failure Phenotypes, and Mortality Risk in the Nationwide START Registry: A Propensity Score Matching Analysis

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**BACKGROUND:** Data on atrial fibrillation (AF) and heart failure (HF) with preserved ejection fraction (HFpEF) are scarce. We investigated the association of HFpEF with all-cause mortality in AF.

**METHODS:** We included 10369 patients with AF on oral anticoagulants from the nationwide ongoing START (Survey on Anticoagulated Patients Register) registry. Patients were divided into 3 groups: (1) no HF, (2) HF with reduced EF/HF with mildly reduced EF (EF  $\leq$ 50%), and HFpEF (EF >50%). Patients with HF should have had a clinical diagnosis or a history of HF hospitalization. The association between HF types and all-cause mortality was investigated by Cox proportional hazards regression analysis to estimate hazard ratio (HR) and 95% CI for each factor. The Fine–Gray model and propensity score matching were used.

**RESULTS:** Mean age was 76.4 $\pm$ 9.4 years and 45.8% were women. Overall, 2309 (22.2%) patients had HF, of whom 47.4% had HFpEF. During 720 $\pm$ 576 days of follow-up (20 747 patients/year), 727 deaths occurred (3.5 per 100 patient-years). After propensity score matching, both HF with mildly reduced EF/HF with reduced EF and HFpEF were associated with all-cause mortality (HR, 1.33;  $P=0.037$  and HR, 1.49;  $P=0.004$ ). HFpEF was associated with mortality in men (HR, 1.654;  $P=0.001$ ) but not in women (HR, 1.243;  $P=0.175$ ). In HFpEF, age $\geq$ 75 years (HR, 2.247;  $P=0.003$ ), chronic respiratory disease (HR, 2.109;  $P<0.001$ ), anemia (HR, 1.482;  $P=0.035$ ), paroxysmal AF (HR, 0.528;  $P=0.012$ ), creatinine clearance<30 mL/min (HR, 1.791;  $P=0.018$ ), direct oral anticoagulants (HR, 0.575;  $P=0.005$ ), and renin-angiotensin inhibitors (HR, 0.670;  $P=0.033$ ) were associated with all-cause mortality.

**CONCLUSIONS:** HFpEF is frequent in patients with AF and associated with an increased mortality, especially in men. Comorbidities and treatments associated differently with mortality according to HF phenotype.

**REGISTRATION:** URL: <https://www.clinicaltrials.gov>; Unique identifier: NCT02219984.

**Key Words:** AF ■ atrial fibrillation ■ heart failure ■ HFpEF ■ HFrEF/HFmrEF ■ mortality

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## CLINICAL PERSPECTIVE

### What Is New?

- Heart failure (HF) with preserved ejection fraction is common in patients with atrial fibrillation and independently associated with increased all-cause mortality.
- The mortality risk linked to HF with preserved ejection fraction is sex specific, being significant in men but not in women.

### What Are the Clinical Implications?

- Patients with atrial fibrillation with HF with preserved ejection fraction should not be considered at lower risk—they have significant mortality risk, especially older men with comorbidities.
- Tailored treatment strategies (eg, use of direct oral anticoagulants, renin-angiotensin-aldosterone system inhibitors) may improve outcomes in HF with preserved ejection fraction; recognizing HF phenotype in atrial fibrillation is essential for personalized therapeutic decisions.

## Nonstandard Abbreviations and Acronyms

<b>AAD</b>	antiarrhythmic drug
<b>CRF</b>	case report form
<b>DOAC</b>	direct oral anticoagulant
<b>HFmrEF</b>	heart failure with mildly reduced ejection fraction
<b>HFpEF</b>	heart failure with preserved ejection fraction
<b>HFrEF</b>	heart failure with reduced ejection fraction
<b>OSAS</b>	obstructive sleep apnea syndrome
<b>PSM</b>	propensity score matching
<b>RAASI</b>	renin-angiotensin-aldosterone system inhibitor
<b>VKA</b>	vitamin K antagonist

**A**trial fibrillation (AF) and heart failure (HF) often coexist.<sup>1</sup> The reported prevalence of AF in patients with HF ranges between 13% and 27%.<sup>1-4</sup> Notably, this prevalence seems to increase according to HF severity from 5% in mild HF up to 50% in patients with severe HF.<sup>5</sup>

A study performed on Framingham Heart Study participants showed that 37% of 1737 individuals with new-onset AF had concomitant HF and, conversely, 57% of 1166 individuals with new HF had concomitant AF.<sup>6</sup> A further study,<sup>7</sup> performed on 1265 patients with AF showed a prevalence of HF of 34.3%.

The coexistence of these 2 cardiovascular disorders may be partly attributable to the presence of common cardiometabolic risk factors such as arterial hypertension, smoking, diabetes, obesity, and previous myocardial infarction.<sup>1,8</sup> A common pathogenetic mechanism may be represented by systemic inflammation. In particular, the interleukin-6, interleukin-1 $\beta$ , and tumor necrosis factor pathways may activate metalloproteinases and may inhibit the inhibitors of metalloproteinases. Furthermore, these cytokines also induce myocyte hypertrophy and fibrosis.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the renin-angiotensin pathway, activating the MAP (mitogen-activated protein) kinases pathway, may induce myocyte hypertrophy and fibrosis, increasing the risk of developing both AF and HF.<sup>8</sup>

This coexistence is also linked to a higher risk of worse clinical outcomes, such as mortality. Indeed, a large meta-analysis including 20 studies with 152 306 patients with HF showed a higher risk of death if patients had a coexisting AF.<sup>9</sup> A Polish study<sup>10</sup> including 688 hospitalized patients with AF during 1-year follow-up showed a higher mortality rate in patients with HF, regardless of the phenotype, compared with patients without AF.

A post hoc analysis of the ENGAGE-AF TIMI 48<sup>11</sup> (Effective Anticoagulation With Factor Xa Next Generation in AF-Thrombolysis in Myocardial Infarction 48) trial performed on 21 105 patients with AF (57.4% with HF, of whom 22.1% had unknown EF) showed a higher risk of HF hospitalization and HF death in patients with concomitant AF and HF, without differences in thromboembolic stroke or major bleeding during a median follow-up of 2.8 years.

Thus, the high prevalence and coexistence of these disorders has several clinical implications and represent a challenge for the clinicians. In this context, evidence on the association between HF with preserved ejection fraction (HFpEF) and AF in clinical practice, as well as the role of comorbidities according to each HF phenotype is less established.

For this reason, aims of our study were to investigate (1) the difference between patients with AF with either HFpEF or HF with reduced EF/HF with mildly reduced EF (HFrEF/HFmrEF) in a real-world population, (2) the association of each phenotype of HF and all-cause mortality, and (3) the pattern of comorbidities and treatments associated with each type of HF.

## METHODS

### Survey on Anticoagulated Patients Register

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

The START (Survey on Anticoagulated Patients Register) registry is an observational, multicenter, ongoing cohort study that includes patients (aged  $\geq 18$  years) who start anticoagulation therapy, either vitamin K antagonist (VKAs) (warfarin or acenocoumarol) or direct oral anticoagulants (DOACs), throughout Italy. Analysis was performed on patients enrolled until December 2023. Details of the START registry have been previously described.<sup>12</sup> The START registry has been previously registered on [ClinicalTrials.gov](https://clinicaltrials.gov) (NCT02219984). The study protocol was accepted by the institutional review board of each participating center, and informed consent was obtained from patients at enrollment.

The study protocol complies with the ethical guidelines of the 1975 Helsinki Declaration, and informed consent was obtained from each patient.

Patients treated with low-molecular-weight heparin were excluded as well as patients already enrolled in phase 2 or 3 clinical studies. Patients enrolled in other observational or phase 4 studies were considered eligible for the study.

## Baseline Characteristics

Patients' clinical features are recorded by participants on web-based case report forms. Baseline data are demographic and clinical characteristics of patients, including cardiovascular risk factors, laboratory routine data, comorbidities, EF, smoking habits, indication for anticoagulant treatment, type of oral anticoagulation, and concomitant drugs.

Previous cardiovascular disease was defined as history of coronary artery disease (either ischemic heart disease or coronary revascularization with stent or coronary artery bypass graft), while cerebrovascular disease is defined as previous ischemic stroke or transient ischaemic attack.

HFrEF/HFmrEF are defined as (1) medical history of hospital admission for HF or symptoms and signs suggestive for HF, and (2) EF  $< 50\%$  as reported in the electronic case report form.

Patients with history of HF or signs or symptoms suggestive for HF and EF  $\geq 50\%$  were classified as HFpEF.

## Primary End Points

The primary end points of the studies were (1) to establish the all-cause mortality risk in patients with AF with HFrEF/HFmrEF and HFpEF, and (2) to evaluate potential concomitant comorbidities and risk factors predictive of all-cause mortality.

## Statistical Analysis

Continuous variables were reported as means  $\pm$  SDs, and categorical variables as counts and percentages.

Population characteristics were described across 3 groups: (1) patients without HF (no HF), (2) patients with HFrEF or HFmrEF (left ventricular EF  $\leq 50\%$ ), and (3) patients with HFpEF (left ventricular EF  $> 50\%$ ). One-way ANOVA was used to compare continuous variables across the 3 groups. Subsequently, post hoc comparisons were performed using Tukey's test, to identify differences between HFpEF and HFrEF/HFmrEF. Categorical variables were compared using the chi-square test.

Continuous variables were included in the models as linear terms, based on clinical interpretability and parsimony. Categorical variables were treated as factors, and no interaction terms were included in the final models. This modeling strategy was chosen to ensure stability and interpretability of the multivariable models and to reduce the risk of overfitting given the number of covariates considered.

Then, the cumulative incidence of all-cause mortality was estimated using a Kaplan–Meier product-limit estimator for each group, and survival curves were formally compared using the log-rank test.

Univariable and multivariable Cox proportional hazards regression analysis was used to calculate the adjusted relative hazard ratios (HRs) and 95% CI of all-cause of death by each clinical variable. In the multivariable analysis, individual variables instead of the CHA<sub>2</sub>DS<sub>2</sub>-VASc score were entered. Age was dichotomized at 75 years; this threshold was chosen based on its clinical relevance to cardiovascular risk, as recommended by international guidelines.<sup>13</sup>

A subgroup analysis was performed according to the 3 groups of study using a stepwise multivariable Cox proportional hazards regression analysis to evaluate factors associated with all-cause mortality. Results of subgroup analysis were expressed as HR and 95% CI.

The Fine–Gray model was used to estimate the cumulative incidence of cardiovascular mortality while accounting for the competing risk of noncardiovascular death. A univariate model was first fitted, accounting for HF type (reference: no HF). Subsequently, an adjusted multivariate model was performed, incorporating baseline demographic and clinical covariates, that is, sex, age, body mass index, comorbidities (hypertension, diabetes, coronary artery disease, anemia), history of cancer, kidney function, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), liver cirrhosis, smoking status, dementia, and DOAC use. All these covariates were selected based on clinical rationale, aiming to adjust for the full range of relevant comorbidities and features and reflecting the complexity typical of patients with AF. To assess multicollinearity among the covariates, the variance inflation factor was computed for each variable in the model. Variables with variance inflation factor values  $> 3$  were considered potentially

problematic. However, no covariates in the final model had a variance inflation factor exceeding this threshold, indicating that collinearity was not a concern.

We then used propensity score matching (PSM) to account for confounding between patients with HFpEF or HFmrEF/HFrEF and without HF, in order to assess consistency of results across different modeling strategies. The propensity score was estimated using logistic regression, incorporating the following covariates: sex, age, body mass index, DOAC use, hypertension, diabetes, coronary artery disease, anemia, glomerular filtration rate, cancer, COPD/obstructive sleep apnea syndrome (OSAS), cirrhosis with varices, smoking, and dementia. These variables were chosen a priori as they reflect the most common comorbidities in patients with AF.

Patients with HFpEF and HFmrEF/HFrEF were matched 1:1 to those without HF using nearest-neighbor matching with a caliper width of 0.1, without replacement. Covariate balance post matching was assessed using standardized mean differences, with values <0.1 considered indicative of adequate balance. A summary of PSM balance for HFmrEF/HFrEF and HFpEF was reported in [Table S1](#) top panel and B, respectively. Moreover, further balance diagnostics, that is, Love plots and propensity score distributions plots comparing before and after matching, are available in [Figures S1](#) and [S2](#).

After PSM, we analyzed the matched data using Kaplan–Meier curves to estimate all-cause mortality. A univariate Cox proportional hazards model was used to calculate the HR for all-cause mortality. The proportional hazard assumption was tested using Schoenfeld residuals.

No imputation was applied for missing data. Only *P* values <0.05 were considered as statistically significant. All tests were 2 tailed and analyses were performed using computer software packages (IBM SPSS-25, SPSS Inc. R Software v. 4.2.3, and MedCalc).

## RESULTS

### Clinical Characteristics

Overall, 2309 (22.2%) of 10 369 patients with AF were affected by HF. Of these, 47.4% had HFpEF. In [Table 1](#) were reported clinical and demographics characteristics of patients according to 3 groups: no HF, HFrEF/HFmrEF and HFpEF.

Mean age was 76.4±9.4 years with a significant difference among groups ([Table 1](#)). Patients with HFpEF were older (mean age 79.4±8.5 years) with a higher proportion of patients with age≥75 years (74.8%) compared with patients without HF and HFrEF/HFmrEF (mean age 75.9±9.4 and 76.3±9.5 years, respectively) ([Table 1](#)). A high proportion of women (53.2%)

was found in patients with HFpEF with a significant difference compared with those with HFrEF/HFmrEF (35.4%) ([Table 1](#)).

Patients with HFpEF and HFrEF/HFmrEF were more commonly affected by arterial hypertension, diabetes, previous cardiovascular disease, obesity, COPD/OSAS, chronic kidney disease, anemia, and higher CHA<sub>2</sub>DS<sub>2</sub>-VASc score without difference in previous cerebrovascular disease compared with patients without HF ([Table 1](#)).

Furthermore, patients with HFpEF were more likely to be affected by arterial hypertension compared with HFrEF/HFmrEF. On the other hand, patients with HFrEF/HFmrEF were more commonly affected by history of cardiovascular disease and diabetes and were smokers ([Table 1](#)).

All patients in our cohort were treated with oral anticoagulants (56.3% on DOACs, 43.7% on VKAs). A higher proportion of patients with HF, especially HFrEF/HFmrEF, were treated with lipid-lowering therapy, antiplatelet, digoxin, amiodarone, and β-blockers ([Table 1](#)). On the other hand, patients without HF were likely to be treated with Class 1C antiarrhythmics (1C AADs) and calcium channel blockers compared with patients with HFrEF/HFmrEF or HFpEF. Comparing type of HF, HFrEF/HFmrEF had a higher proportion of patients treated with β-blockers, antiplatelets, lipid-lowering drugs, and renin-angiotensin system inhibitors ([Table 1](#)).

### Phenotype of HF and All-Cause Mortality Risk

During a mean follow-up of 720±576 days (20 747 patients/year), 727 deaths occurred (incidence rate 3.5 per 100 patient-years [95% CI, 3.3–3.8]).

[Table S2](#) reported clinical characteristics according to survival status. Patients who were deceased were older, with a high proportion of patients with HF, persistent/permanent AF, arterial hypertension, previous cerebrovascular and cardiovascular disease, diabetes, anemia, COPD/OSAS, smoking habits, and chronic kidney disease (CKD) ([Table S2](#)).

Patients who were deceased were likely treated with digoxin, diuretics, VKAs, and β-blockers. On the other hand, there was a low proportion of patients treated with renin-angiotensin-aldosterone system inhibitors (RAASi) drugs, Class 1C AADs, and lipid-lowering therapy ([Table S2](#)).

Kaplan–Meier survival curves showed a low survival rate, both for HFpEF and HFrEF/HFmrEF, compared with patients without HF ([Figure](#)) (log-rank test *P*<0.001). However, no difference in all-cause mortality was observed between HFrEF/HFmrEF and HFpEF (univariable HR, 1.17 [95% CI, 0.91–1.50], *P*=0.211).

Multivariable Cox regression analysis indicated that overall population, age≥75 years, anemia, CKD, COPD/OSAS, peripheral artery disease, and history of cardiovascular or cerebrovascular disease were associated

**Table 1. Clinical Characteristics of Patients With Atrial Fibrillation Involved in the Study According to the Presence of Heart Failure**

	No.	Whole cohort (n=10369)	No HF (n=8060)	HFrEF/HFmrEF≤50% (n=1215)	HFpEF>50% (n=1094)	P value among groups	P value HFpEF vs HFrEF/HFmrEF
Mean age, y	10363	76.4±9.4	75.9±9.4	76.3±9.5	79.4±8.5	<0.001	<0.001
Age≥75 y, %	10363	62.5	61.0	62.0	74.8	<0.001	<0.001
Women, %	10369	45.8	46.3	35.4	53.2	<0.001	<0.001
Paroxysmal atrial fibrillation (vs persistent/permanent), %	10260	37.5	39.7	30.1	29.1	<0.001	0.613
Arterial hypertension, %	10369	80.8	79.1	85.0	88.9	<0.001	0.007
Diabetes, %	10369	20.7	18.9	29.1	24.5	<0.001	0.013
Obesity (body mass index≥30kg/m <sup>2</sup> )	10366	21.6	20.8	24.6	23.9	0.002	0.734
Previous cerebrovascular disease, %	10369	15.6	15.9	14.9	14.2	0.273	0.680
Previous cardiovascular disease, %	10369	17.0	13.7	33.3	22.7	<0.001	<0.001
Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease/obstructive sleep apnea syndrome, %	10369	11.3	8.6	19.4	22.7	<0.001	0.052
Current smoking, %	10369	4.6	4.4	6.7	3.8	<0.001	<0.001
Former smoking, %	10369	12.2	11.3	18.2	12.8	<0.001	<0.001
Anemia, %	10369	26.2	23.3	35.7	36.4	<0.001	0.729
Creatinine clearance<30mL/min, %	10353	5.0	3.8	9.6	9.3	<0.001	0.831
Peripheral artery disease, %	10369	5.9	5.1	9.2	8.1	<0.001	0.376
CHA <sub>2</sub> DS <sub>2</sub> -VASc score	10363	3.7±1.5	3.4±1.4	4.3±1.5	4.9±1.3	<0.001	<0.001
Therapy							
Direct oral anticoagulants, %	10369	56.3	57.5	48.5	56.1	<0.001	<0.001
Lipid-lowering drugs, %	10369	35.3	33.9	44.3	35.8	<0.001	<0.001
Antiplatelets, %	10369	11.9	10.7	21.0	10.9	<0.001	<0.001
Digoxin, %	10369	8.3	6.2	14.5	16.8	<0.001	0.135
Amiodarone, %	10369	12.4	11.2	19.6	13.2	<0.001	<0.001
Class 1C antiarrhythmic drugs, %	10369	8.7	10.5	2.1	2.4	<0.001	0.671
β-blockers, %	10369	47.2	43.9	63.1	53.7	<0.001	<0.001
Renin-angiotensin-aldosterone system inhibitors, %	10369	56.3	55.2	64.8	55.0	<0.001	<0.001
Calcium channel blockers, %	10369	22.0	22.5	17.6	23.4	<0.001	0.001
Diuretics, %	10369	38.7	29.5	71.7	69.5	<0.001	0.273

HF indicates heart failure; HFmrEF, heart failure with mildly reduced ejection fraction; HFpEF, heart failure with preserved ejection fraction; and HFrEF, heart failure with reduced ejection fraction.

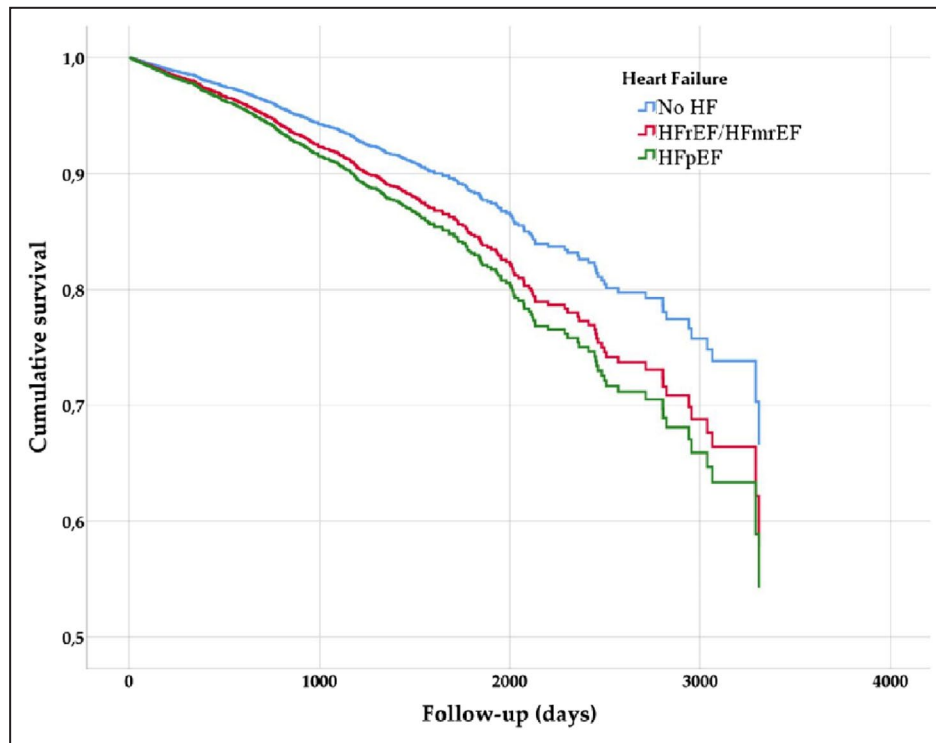
with all-cause mortality (Table S3). Both HFpEF and HFrEF/HFmrEF were associated with all-cause mortality (HR, 1.417 [95% CI, 1.146–1.753],  $P<0.001$  and HR, 1.269 [95% CI, 1.081–1.680],  $P=0.036$ , respectively). Conversely, female sex, paroxysmal AF, the use of DOAC, and the use of 1C AADs and lipid-lowering therapy were inversely associated with all-cause mortality in this model (Table S3).

### Subgroup Analysis and All-Cause Mortality Risk

To evaluate potential differences in comorbidities and predictors of all-cause mortality in patients with HFpEF, HFrEF/HFmrEF, and without HF, we performed a subgroup analysis of study groups.

In patients without HF a stepwise multivariable Cox proportional hazards regression analysis showed a direct association between age, COPD/OSAS, diabetes, anemia, CKD, peripheral artery disease, previous cerebrovascular and cardiovascular disease, and all-cause mortality (Table 2, top panel). Conversely, paroxysmal AF, the use of DOAC, RAASi, Class 1C AADs, and lipid-lowering therapy were inversely associated with all-cause mortality (Table 2, top panel).

In patients with HFrEF/HFmrEF as shown in Table 2, middle panel, CKD, peripheral artery disease, and older age were associated with an increased risk of all-cause mortality, whereas the inverse association between RAASi use and all-cause mortality was confirmed also in this subgroup.



**Figure.** Kaplan–Meier curve for all-cause mortality according to the presence of heart failure.

HF indicates heart failure; HFmrEF, heart failure with mildly reduced ejection fraction; HFpEF, heart failure with preserved ejection fraction; and HFrEF, heart failure with reduced ejection fraction.

On the other hand, in patients with HFpEF, as shown in [Table 2](#), bottom panel, predictors of all-cause mortality were older and had COPD/OSAS, anemia, and CKD, whereas the use of DOACs and RAASi and paroxysmal AF were associated with lower risk of all-cause mortality ([Table 2](#), bottom panel).

### Analysis by Sex

We also performed a subgroup analysis by sex ([Table S4](#)). In men (top panel), older age, COPD/OSAS, anemia, CKD, peripheral artery disease, and clinical history of cerebrovascular or cardiovascular disease were associated with all-cause mortality. Among treatments, the use of DOACs, RAASi, lipid-lowering therapy, and Class 1C AADs were inversely associated with all-cause mortality (top panel).

On the other hand, in women (bottom panel), older age, COPD/OSAS, anemia, CKD, or HFpEF were directly associated with all-cause mortality, whereas clinical history of cerebrovascular or cardiovascular disease were directly associated with all-cause mortality.

The use of DOACs, RAASi, lipid-lowering therapy, and Class 1C AADs was inversely associated with all-cause mortality in women (bottom panel).

### Competing Risk and PSM

[Table S5](#) shows the Fine–Gray model results for cardiovascular mortality accounting for the competing risk of noncardiovascular mortality. In the univariate analysis, both HFrEF/HFmrEF (HR, 2.61 [95% CI, 1.76–3.88],  $P < 0.001$ ) and HFpEF (HR, 2.72 [95% CI, 1.81–4.10],  $P < 0.001$ ) were associated with higher cardiovascular mortality risk. After adjustment for all prespecified baseline covariates, the associations remained significant (HFrEF/HFmrEF: HR, 2.03 [95% CI, 1.30–3.16],  $P = 0.002$ ; HFpEF: HR, 1.85 [95% CI, 1.19–2.87],  $P = 0.006$ ). Of note, among covariates, older age (HR, 1.10 [95% CI, 1.07–1.13],  $P < 0.001$ ), smoking (HR, 1.59 [95% CI, 1.01–2.51],  $P = 0.045$ ), and dementia (HR, 2.03 [95% CI, 1.11–3.72],  $P = 0.021$ ) were associated with higher risk of cardiovascular mortality, whereas the inverse association between DOAC use and cardiovascular mortality (HR, 0.49 [95% CI, 0.34–0.71],  $P < 0.001$ ) was confirmed in this model (full adjusted model was shown in [Table S5](#)).

We then used PSM to confirm robustness of our findings; [Table S6](#) shows data for the matched cohorts. After PSM, we included in the analysis 1194 patients with HFmrEF/HFrEF and 1194 patients without HF ([Table S6](#), top panel) with all baseline characteristics well balanced between the 2 groups. After PSM,

**Table 2. Stepwise Multivariable Cox Proportional Hazards Regression Analysis of Factors Associated with All-Cause Mortality in Patients Without HF, HFrEF/HFmrEF, and HFpEF**

Patients without HF	Hazard ratio	95% CI		P value
		Low	High	
Age≥75 y	3.067	2.381	3.951	<0.001
COPD/OSAS	1.909	1.474	2.472	<0.001
Diabetes	1.287	1.026	1.615	0.029
Anemia	1.726	1.419	2.100	<0.001
Paroxysmal atrial fibrillation (vs persistent/permanent)	0.774	0.632	0.948	0.013
Creatinine clearance <30 mL/min	2.070	1.522	2.815	<0.001
Peripheral artery disease	1.659	1.206	2.282	0.002
Previous cerebrovascular disease	1.310	1.042	1.646	0.021
Previous cardiovascular disease	1.732	1.360	2.205	<0.001
DOAC	0.475	0.386	0.585	<0.001
RAASi	0.808	0.670	0.975	0.026
Class 1C antiarrhythmic drugs	0.609	0.387	0.960	0.033
Lipid-lowering therapy	0.576	0.461	0.722	<0.001
Patients with HFrEF/HFmrEF				
Women	0.603	0.400	0.908	0.015
Age≥75 y	2.465	1.555	3.907	<0.001
Creatinine clearance <30 mL/min	3.228	2.094	4.977	<0.001
Peripheral artery disease	2.246	1.387	3.638	0.001
RAASi	0.600	0.413	0.872	0.007
Patients with HFpEF				
Age≥75 y	2.247	1.310	3.853	0.003
COPD/OSAS	2.109	1.440	3.089	<0.001
Anemia	1.482	1.028	2.136	0.035
Paroxysmal atrial fibrillation (vs persistent/permanent)	0.528	0.322	0.867	0.012
Creatinine clearance <30 mL/min	1.791	1.104	2.906	0.018
DOAC	0.575	0.390	0.845	0.005
RAASi	0.670	0.464	0.968	0.033

COPD indicates chronic obstructive pulmonary disease; DOAC, direct oral anticoagulants; HF, heart failure, HFmrEF, heart failure with mildly reduced ejection fraction; HFpEF, heart failure with preserved ejection fraction; HFrEF, heart failure with reduced ejection fraction, OSAS, obstructive sleep apnea syndrome; and RAASi, renin angiotensin aldosterone system inhibitors.

we included in the analysis 1088 patients with HFpEF and 1088 patients without HF (Table S6, bottom panel) with all baseline characteristics well balanced.

Then, we performed Kaplan–Meier survival curves for all-cause mortality of patients with HFmrEF/HFrEF compared with those without HF in the PSM cohort (Figure S3A) and patients with HFpEF compared with those without HF in the PSM cohort (Figure S3B). Both patients with HFmrEF/HFrEF and HFpEF exhibited significantly lower overall survival over time compared with those without HF (log-rank test  $P=0.037$  and  $P=0.003$ , respectively). In the univariate Cox proportional hazards model, HFmrEF/HFrEF and HFpEF were significantly associated with an increased risk of all-cause mortality (HR, 1.33 [95% CI, 1.02–1.74],  $P=0.037$  and HR, 1.49 [95% CI, 1.14–1.94],  $P=0.004$ ).

## DISCUSSION

The analysis of our registry that included >10000 patients with AF on oral anticoagulants showed a high prevalence of patients with HF of 22.2%, of whom nearly 50% had HFpEF. Notably, both patients with HFpEF and HFrEF/HFmrEF, compared with patients without HF, had an increased risk of death that persisted after adjustment for potential confounding factors.

We found a prevalence of HF in the with AF cohort coherent with a previous analysis performed on GARFIELD-AF (Global Anticoagulant Registry in the Field-Atrial Fibrillation) registry, in which about 18% of patients had a diagnosis of HF. However, among patients with available EF in the GARFIELD-AF cohort, only 9.8% had an EF<40%, suggesting that a high

proportion of patients with HF had a preserved or mildly reduced EF.<sup>14</sup>

In our cohort, patients with HFpEF were older, more frequently women, and affected by arterial hypertension compared with those with HFrEF/HFmrEF. The role of RAASi in the reduction of all-cause mortality in patients with AF has been previously investigated,<sup>15</sup> however, our study showed that this inverse association was consistent in patients with AF independently from type HF as RAASi use was associated with lower mortality risk both in HFpEF and HFrEF/HFmrEF.

Patients with HFrEF/HFmrEF had a higher proportion of history of cardiovascular disease, as expected by the ischemic cause commonly responsible for HFrEF/HFmrEF onset.

We found that the presence of either HFpEF or HFrEF/HFmrEF with AF was associated with an increased risk of death. A previous study performed on 23644 patients with HF (diagnosed according to *International Classification of Diseases, Ninth Revision [ICD-9]* codes), showed that the risk of death was increased in both HFpEF and HFrEF/HFmrEF.<sup>16</sup> However, the cohort of this study was represented by patients with HF only and differs broadly from our cohort. Indeed, only 23.5% of patients were treated with oral anticoagulants and had a higher proportion of patients treated with lipid-lowering therapy and antiplatelets and a higher proportion of patients with chronic lung disease.<sup>16</sup>

We found a mortality rate of 3.5 per 100 patient-years, similar to that reported in the COOL-AF (Cohort of Antithrombotic Use and Clinical Outcomes in Patients With Atrial Fibrillation) prospective cohort enrolling 3046 patients with AF, which showed a mortality rate of 3.6 per 100 patient-years (ranged between 2.5 per 100 patient-years in patients with paroxysmal AF and 4.4 per 100 patient-years in patients with persistent AF).<sup>17</sup> Although patients were younger in the COOL-AF cohort and a lower thromboembolic risk evaluated by CHA<sub>2</sub>DS<sub>2</sub>-VASc score was found, a similar mortality rate was observed. This could be explained by the high burden of comorbidities registered in the COOL-AF cohort despite the younger age and also the high proportion of patients who were not taking oral anticoagulants (1 out of 3 patients was taking antiplatelets). Likewise, in the GARFIELD-AF registry the mortality rate at 1 year ranged between 3.04 and 4.05.<sup>14</sup> In this study, patients were younger with a lower mean of CHA<sub>2</sub>DS<sub>2</sub>-VASc score compared with our cohort, with similar proportions of patients with paroxysmal AF. Of note, few patients were treated with DOACs in the GARFIELD-AF registry, especially in the cohort of patients enrolled retrospectively.<sup>14</sup> Also in this cohort, a proportion of patients ranging between 26.9% and 30.2%<sup>14</sup> was treated with antiplatelet drugs alone increasing the risk of cerebrovascular disease and also the mortality rate associated with stroke.

A novel finding of our work is in investigating the role of different cardiovascular and noncardiovascular comorbidities according to HF phenotype.

Compared with HFrEF, in patients with HFpEF a relevant role on all causes of death was played by comorbidities such as CKD, anemia, and respiratory disease such as COPD/OSAS.

This finding reflects the distinct pathophysiology of these conditions. In HFrEF, the primary abnormality is related to the reduced systolic function of the left ventricle, leading to impaired pumping capacity and systemic fluid overload, which is the main driver of symptoms and signs and subsequent mortality in this type of HF. Conversely, HFpEF is characterized by increased filling pressure and myocardial stiffness often driven by systemic low-grade inflammation and microvascular dysfunction.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, HFpEF may be the result of the presence of different comorbidities, such as obesity, COPD, and pulmonary hypertension, that may lead to HF through different pathways without impairing systolic function of the left ventricle.<sup>19</sup>

As an example, HFpEF is the most common form of HF in patients with COPD (70%).<sup>20</sup> COPD further exacerbates HFpEF through 2 mechanisms: first, by promoting systemic inflammation and intermittent hypoxia, and second, by inducing pulmonary hypertension, which increases right ventricular afterload leading to right ventricular function impairment.<sup>21,22</sup>

For these reasons, they are now recognized as different phenotypes of HFpEF and a phenotype-based therapeutic approach is warranted.<sup>23</sup> As such, the identification of the comorbidity contributing the most to the HF phenotype is essential to improve cardiac status. For instance, when an “obesity phenotype” is identified, promoting a healthy lifestyle—including regular physical activity, weight loss, optimized glycemic control, and a balanced diet—should be a top priority for these patients.<sup>21</sup> This may also be obtained by preferring the use of drugs known to facilitate weight loss especially in patients with diabetes (ie, semaglutide, liraglutide, and tirzepatide). As a background therapy in these patients, SGLT2 (sodium/glucose cotransporter 2) inhibitors should always be considered when not contraindicated, as they allow natriuresis and improved myocardial energy, preserve renal function, and reduce the risk of HF hospitalization and mortality.<sup>24</sup>

Thromboprophylaxis with DOAC in patients with AF and HF is particularly important given the inverse association with all-cause mortality. This reduction may be led by the reduction of cardiovascular events associated with DOAC use as shown in a large prospective cohort of 2366 patients with AF during a long-term follow-up.<sup>25</sup> Further mechanisms associated with a reduction in mortality in patients treated with DOACs may be related to the lower deterioration of kidney function compared with VKAs, which is associated

with an increased risk of mortality.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, patients on DOACs show a lower risk of stroke<sup>27,28</sup> and bleeding,<sup>28</sup> especially intracranial bleeding, compared with VKAs, and this may lead to a lower mortality rate in patients treated with DOACs.

Regarding drugs, we found that rhythm control with Class 1C AADs was inversely associated with all-cause mortality, whereas no associations were found with  $\beta$ -blockers, calcium channel blockers, or digoxin. This finding is coherent with a previous meta-analysis<sup>29</sup> including 5 studies with 16825 patients with AF and HFpEF. In this study,<sup>29</sup> rhythm control for AF was associated with lower all-cause mortality (odds ratio [OR], 0.735 [95% CI, 0.665–0.813];  $P < 0.001$ ) compared with rate control.

In addition, patients with HFrEF were more likely to be treated with RAASi compared with patients with HFpEF despite a higher prevalence of hypertension in the latter group. This may be mainly due to the higher prevalence of ischemic heart disease in the group with HFrEF for whom RAASi treatment is mandatory in most cases.<sup>30</sup> However, we found an inverse association between RAASi and mortality in both groups of HF, but, given the observational nature of the study, we could not exclude the presence of a selection bias that may influence the results.

We also found a sex difference in the association between HFpEF and mortality. Indeed, HFpEF independently associated with mortality in men but not in women. A report from the ARIC (Atherosclerosis Risk in Communities) Community Surveillance Study including patients with HFpEF without AF showed a higher risk of 1-year mortality in men but not in women.<sup>31</sup> Our findings are coherent with previous literature: indeed, in western populations, HFpEF had a greater prevalence in women but with a lower risk of mortality compared with men.<sup>32</sup> This may be explained by several differences. First, the first cause of HF in men was ischemic heart disease, whereas in women it was the concomitant presence of multiple cardiovascular and noncardiovascular comorbidities such as arterial hypertension, diabetes, endocrine disorders, and rheumatic diseases.<sup>32</sup> A further explanation of this phenomenon could be derived from a large analysis including 4458 women and 4010 men with HFpEF.<sup>33</sup> In this cohort women had a higher burden of symptoms and similar rates of hospitalizations but lower rates of death compared with men. The authors found that this difference was related to a lower incidence of cardiac sudden death, which was usually associated with coronary artery disease, that affected more frequently men than women.<sup>33</sup>

## Limitations

Our study has several limitations to acknowledge. The lack of data on natriuretic peptides in the START registry

does not allow us to perfectly adhere to the definition of HF defined by the European Society of Cardiology.<sup>30</sup> However, this limitation is present in all registry studies that began before the introduction of the current HF classification. In addition, a recent American Heart Association/American College of Cardiology/Heart Failure Society of America guideline<sup>34</sup> emphasizes the role of trajectories of EF, identifying a group of patients with HF with improved EF that may have different prognosis. In our study we could not detect these patients as evaluation of EF was made only at study entry.

Furthermore, the START registry includes almost exclusively White patients, so the prevalence and role of comorbidities may be different in different ethnicities. A further limitation was the lack of information about adherence on anticoagulation over time. This aspect is of clinical relevance as taking DOAC over VKAs does not directly translate into a higher adherence to anticoagulation prescription,<sup>35</sup> meaning that a proportion of patients may be nonadherent during follow-up. Additionally, we have no data about implantable cardioverter-defibrillator implantation and direct current shocks.

Finally, we dichotomized age at 75 years based on clinical relevance and consistency with established risk scores (ie, CHA<sub>2</sub>DS<sub>2</sub>-VASc). However, this approach may potentially obscure age-related variation and reduce statistical power. Although more flexible modeling could improve precision, we chose to prioritize clinical interpretability.

However, the analysis on a large number of patients from different centers and the adjustment for multiple cardiovascular risk factors, also after PSM and competing risk analysis, give strength to the results.

## CONCLUSIONS

In patients with AF, a significant proportion of patients with HF have a phenotype of HFpEF and are at increased risk of mortality. Our results suggest that patients with HFpEF require an approach that takes into consideration noncardiovascular comorbidities associated with an elevated risk of mortality.

## APPENDIX

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None.

### Supplemental Material

Tables S1–S6  
Figures S1–S3

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