How to Handle an AFib Episode

by ANGELA FINLAY

Tips to Get Through an AFib Attack Quickly and Comfortably

An AFib attack can feel scary or uncomfortable, but rest assured that they are rarely life-threatening. In most cases, the irregular beat, flutter, or rapid heart rate will last for a few minutes, and disappear without leaving any residual discomfort.

If you're feeling new sensations or more pain than you have with AFib in the past, you should visit your doctor to rule out complications or other possible conditions. In other cases, you can learn to lessen the symptoms and relax your mind to weather the AFib episode swiftly and more comfortably.

Learning to Relax During an Episode

Relaxing during an AFib episode is easier said than done. It can be difficult to ignore the flutter in your chest, and it's natural to worry that it will last forever, or turn into something more severe. If you let this anxiety overtake your better judgement, you may even find yourself in a panic attack, or at least in more discomfort than when the episode began.

If you can alleviate some of the physical sensation in your AFib episode, you are more likely to stay calm and comfortable for the duration. These techniques can interrupt your racing heart and may return your body to a restful state more quickly than mental exercises:

Change Positions

In some cases, lying on your left side can trigger or prolong an AFib attack. Simply shifting your weight by rolling onto your back can bring some immediate relief. You may also find that propping yourself up at a comfortable angle with a couple of pillows to take the pressure off your back and chest altogether works nicely.

If you begin to feel lightheaded or dizzy (both palpitations and your anxiety about them can bring on a bout of dizziness), try sitting in a chair, leaning over your lap, and hanging your head between your knees for a few moments.

Focus on Your Breath

It may seem obvious, but the way you breathe can affect the way your heart flutters – or doesn't. Slow, deep breathing is generally the best way to relax your muscles and mind, but there's a specific technique that can help calm your heart, too.

With a hand on your diaphragm (around the center of your lower ribs), take a deep breath and hold it, then slowly exhale while you press firmly down into your diaphragm. Draw out both your inhalations and your exhalations to the count of four, breathing in a circular manner until you feel calm.

Use Heat and Cold

A warm compress or cool towel on the back of the neck or forehead can have a very soothing effect. Alternatively, you can use cold to jolt your body out of the episode: fill the sink with cold water and dunk your face in it to shock your system a little bit.

Next page: using activity to slow your heart rhythm, diet changes and distraction.

Find the Right Activity

Complete relaxation can slow your heart rhythm, but so can a bit of activity. Some people find that some moderate exercise can eradicate an AFib episode – a brisk walk, a few jumping jacks, or a short jog. The theory is that exercise makes the heart beat faster initially, but then it slows down afterwards.

It's difficult to predict whether or not exercise will help, so proceed with caution. In the very least, some light activity can be a welcome distraction from irritating symptoms.

Change Your Diet for Fewer Symptoms

Healthy dietary changes can reduce your chances of future AFib attacks, but a few quick adjustments could also help clear up an episode that's already started. Try these potential fixes from the kitchen:

- **Reduce salt and increase potassium**. Salt can throw off your mineral balance, plus it leads to dehydration, and eventually heart disease – all problems that can spark AFib. Too much salt in the diet can also deplete your potassium stores, and a lack of potassium can directly affect heart rhythm. Bananas are an option, but tomato or prune juice can give you a helpful hit of potassium, too.
- **Add magnesium**. A regular heartbeat depends on magnesium, but it's easy to let your levels drop. Eat a handful of nuts or seeds (cashews, almonds, pumpkin seeds and pine nuts are all good choices), or take a magnesium supplement. An Epsom salt bath will achieve the same result – you'll absorb the Epsom salt (which is magnesium sulfate) through your skin.
- **Drink water**. Dehydration is one of the quickest paths to palpitations, so ditch the alcohol, caffeine, and soft drinks, and pour yourself a big glass of water (or two). Watch out for fruit juices, since many have added salt and too much sugar to hydrate effectively.

Find Comfort with Good Company

Talking or simply listening to someone you trust and enjoy can be very reassuring, and can make the time go much faster. But a good friend or family member may also help your sinus rhythm return to normal through a process called entrainment.

After listening to a normal heartbeat for a few moments, your own heart will tend to slow down to match up with the pace. It's only a theory, but certainly worth a try if you're suffering through a drawn-out AFib episode.

If you'd like to try the entrainment procedure, you may want to invest in a stethoscope to help you hear the other heartbeat loud and clear. Another option is to find an online recording of a normal heartbeat that you can play for as long as you need.

If it doesn't resolve your AFib, don't fret – sometimes a combination of diet change, medication, relaxation, and meditation (with or without the steady heartbeat soundtrack) can do the trick.