Helping Someone With Atrial Fibrillation

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AFib Caretaker Tips

Any new medical diagnosis brings with it a range of feelings. Beginning with shock and ending with acceptance, the feelings can include denial, anger, worry, depression and even relief. Confusion is a feeling that cannot be overlooked.

When a new problem presents, it can be trying to know what course of action is best. Should you dramatically overhaul your life or continue down the same path?

In an interesting way, the response following a new diagnosis is not reserved for the patient. As a loved one of someone experiencing a medical condition, you likely find yourself in a caretaker role, and caretakers often experience the same group of feelings as the patient. If your loved one was diagnosed with atrial fibrillation (AFib), your shock and confusion may surround the diagnosis itself. Your worry is that you cannot find the best interventions to help the special person in your life. You become angry when they do not follow recommendations or miss appointments.

Being a caretaker does require a bit of work, but it is a wonderful gift to someone. Your loved one benefits tremendously. When you selflessly give your time and energy for the well-being of someone else, good things happen. You just want to be sure that your efforts are not wasted. Here's how to go about helping someone with atrial fibrillation.

Get Educated

Confronting something new in your life always requires a solid foundation of education. The information you receive must be from trusted, reputable sources. Avoid information that sounds too simple or too convenient as you look deeper for the truth.

Along the way, be sure to test the data you collect against the opinion of professionals that specialize in AFib and related disorders. Consider absorbing all you can about these issues:

AFib

What is AFib? You may have never heard of it before it began impacting your life. The more you learn about AFib, the better you will be at caring for your loved one.

Generally, AFib is an irregular heart rhythm. In many cases, the upper chambers of the heart beat too quickly. This unusual pace creates issues with poor blood flow and supply throughout the body.

AFib symptoms can be sporadic, consistent or permanent depending on the person and the situation. Symptoms include racing or uncomfortable heart rate, feeling fatigued or weak, being lightheaded or dizzy, chest pain and

shortness of breath. AFib is becoming increasingly understood and common with three million cases expected this year.

Stroke

The more you learn about AFib, you more you realize that it is linked to other medical issues, including stroke. In fact, many people only receive their AFib diagnosis following a stroke. Strokes are linked to AFib because the irregularity of the heart allows blood clots to form in the heart and then travel to brain.

There are many symptoms associated with stroke, so remember “FAST” to help you assess your loved one. “FAST” stands for face, arms, speech and time.

- Face –Ask your loved one to smile. If there is a droop on one side, it could be a stroke.
- Arms – Ask your loved one to raise their arms. It could be a stroke if one limb drifts down towards the floor.
- Speech – Poor speech that is slurred or missing words could also indicate a stroke.
- Time – Time is important because strokes are serious and require immediate medical attention to limit the lasting effects.

Heart Failure

Over time, AFib can weaken the heart to a point that it can no longer pump blood as efficiently as the body requires. Without the needed oxygen getting to all areas, fluid begins to accumulate in the lungs, which creates a long list of issues.

Symptoms of heart failure include weakness, fatigue, weight gain, swelling and coughing. As a caretaker, work to monitor and evaluate your loved one for these symptoms as they may be hard to notice at first or are unnoticed by your loved one. Report all findings to their medical professionals.

Medications

It is almost certain that your loved one will need medications to manage their AFib. Blood thinners are needed to prevent clots from forming and lower the risk of stroke. Another group of medications are used to regulate the heart rhythm. Educate yourself along with your loved one regarding the uses and effects of each medication prescribed. Quiz your loved one at times to test their knowledge. Getting confused about medications is easy and happens too frequently. Patients on blood thinners typically need lab tests to check the usefulness of the medication. Offer to chauffer your loved one to the local lab center to be sure the testing is completed.

Next page: tracking your loved one's triggers and reducing blood pressure.

Track Triggers

Now that you have spent time researching general information about AFib and related diseases, spend time focused on your loved one.

Begin a tracking sheet to monitor AFib symptoms for the person in your life. By doing this, you can attempt to identify trends and patterns in symptoms. Do periods of AFib only happen at night or in the morning? Do certain foods or drinks have an effect on heart function? Is exercise a support or a risk factor?

It is likely impractical and unhealthy for you to constantly be by their side checking for symptoms, and that’s why a tracking sheet is helpful. You can create tracking sheets with multiple copies, teach your loved one about the symptoms and data you are interested in and allow them the task of completing it.

The sheet needs space for date, time, symptoms, severity of symptoms, duration of symptoms, possible triggers

and response to symptoms. This process yields valuable information while maintaining a sense of autonomy for your loved one.

Along with the tracking sheet, create a list of triggers that are widely problematic for people with AFib. Things like caffeine, alcohol, nicotine and various over-the-counter medications frequently cause increased symptoms for people with AFib. Making these known to yourself as well as them will avoid dangerous situations.

Reduce the Pressure

High blood pressure, AFib and stroke share an intimate relationship. To reduce the risk of stroke and the risk of AFib, your loved one must reduce their blood pressure.

The good news is that there are many ways to accomplish this, including increasing focus on exercise, diet and relaxation for your loved one. The benefits are far-reaching, as they will lower their blood pressure, and by engaging in these changes with them, you receive the stress relief associated.

Beginning with exercise, there is no simpler or more beneficial activity than walking. The positive impact on your loved one's physical health is varied, but the reduction in blood pressure is the focus. Going on walks with your loved one with AFib allows you to reap the rewards for yourself.

Walking three times weekly for 30 minutes can also improve mental health as well. Walking will do a world of good for you both as long as the doctors approve the activity level.

Diet changes following an AFib diagnosis are necessary to reduce risk of continued complications or new symptoms. A heart-healthy diet that focuses on ways to reduce blood pressure is the target. Removing extra salts and sticking to lean, white meats is typically recommended.

Shop with your loved one in the beginning to educate them so that they are able to make good food choices moving forward. Along the same lines, creating a weekly menu on Sundays can avoid confusion later in the week. This way, you can be certain that their food choices are improving their health rather than hindering it. With consistency, you can reduce your involvement to put the responsibility back on your loved one.

Walking and diet changes indirectly affect mental health, but there is an effective way to improve it while improving blood pressure: relaxation. Perhaps, your loved one will be resistant to relaxation techniques initially, but over time, they will begin to understand and appreciate the benefits.

Talk to doctors, mental health professionals and friends about what relaxation techniques would be appropriate for your loved one. Many useful articles online describe wonderful techniques like deep breathing, muscle relaxation, autogenics and guided imagery. As you practice with them, you will receive the positives as well.

Conclusion

Caring for someone with AFib requires a certain set of skills that you might not have early on in the process. Help your loved one by educating yourself in the subject of AFib. The related issues may seem overwhelming, but focusing on the facts while taking precautions of lower blood pressure will lead to success for your loved one. As a caretaker, there success is your success. Savor it.