# Are My AFib and Shortness of Breath Related?

by ANGELA FINLAY

## Understanding the Link Between Heart Rhythm and Healthy Breathing

The most common symptoms and risks of atrial fibrillation involve the arteries, the heart and the brain. After all, AFib is an electrical malfunction within the heart, and it follows that the chambers, ventricles, and surrounding regions will bear most of the effects.

But the heart doesn't work alone: all the systems in the body can feel the strain of Afib, including the respiratory system – and the symptoms aren't always easy to spot. It's important to learn how your heart may be affecting your lungs, both directly and through other connected disorders, so you can breathe easy while you manage your AFib.

### Heart Issues Can Interfere With Lung Function

AFib is a disease of many faces, and while some people don't even know they have it, other people are affected by uncomfortable symptoms that can be frightening. Physical sensations in the chest typically come in the form of a flutter or thumping, but it's not uncommon to feel short of breath or general discomfort with your breathing. The problem stems from the way blood moves through the heart – or rather, the way it doesn't move.

During an AFib episode the heart begins to beat so fast that it can't pump blood forward into the body efficiently. In turn, blood can back-up in the pulmonary veins – the pathways responsible for bringing oxygen-rich blood from the lungs to the heart. When those veins are holding this excess blood and interrupting the regular flow, fluid will tend build up in the lungs.

A fluid buildup in the lungs is generally a sign that AFib has overworked the heart so much that it has led to heart failure. Not surprisingly, when the lungs are full of fluid, they can't receive and relay oxygen very well, explaining your shortness of breath or labored breathing. And since your heart is failing to move the oxygen-rich blood to your brain and other organs, mental and physical fatigue normally follow on the heels of breathlessness.

### Sleep Apnea and Heart Conditions

Breathing difficulties can occur while you're asleep, too. When your upper airway collapses during sleep (obstructive sleep apnea) or your central nervous system fails to properly control your breathing (central sleep apnea), you're at risk for blood clots, chronic fatigue, and in some cases, you could stop breathing altogether. But breathing difficulties can also have a far greater effect on your heart than you might imagine.

### A Reciprocal Relationship

There's a higher risk of AFib among people with sleep apnea than in people with other cardiovascular diseases. But studies also show that uncontrolled AFib can lead to sleep apnea, and that can result in chronic fatigue, stroke, and even heart attack. Also, AFib patients with sleep apnea are less likely to enjoy permanent

improvements after Afib treatments like electrical cardioversion.

*Next page: panic attacks and breathing.*

## Sleep Apnea and Heart Conditions

### Risk of Heart Failure

Although AFib doesn't raise your risk of heart attack, sleep apnea does. One recent study reports that up to 75% of heart failure patients have what's known as "sleep-disordered breathing," and another study found that 91% of people that had a nighttime heart attack also had sleep apnea.

Even if your Afib has not yet led to heart failure, your low blood oxygen levels can lead to sleep apnea, and that can leave you vulnerable to serious cardiac events.

The good news is that, since sleep apnea so often occurs alongside AFib, treating one condition can help control the other. The first step is a sleep study, where doctors can determine your respiratory habits during sleep. If it turns out that you are experiencing either type of sleep apnea, you can begin to treat it right away with a CPAP machine, lifestyle changes, or any other approaches that your doctor recommends.

## How Panic Attacks Interfere With Breathing

For many people, AFib and panic attacks go hand in hand, and sometimes it can be difficult to tell them apart. A racing heartbeat, sweating, light-headedness and a general feeling of doom are frightening – but common – symptoms of a panic attack, and they could trigger an AFib attack.

Alternatively, your AFib could bring on a bout of anxiety, and *that* can trigger a panic attack. In either case, your body's anxious response could lead you to hyperventilate (breathe too deeply, too fast).

If you live with Afib and are prone to panic attacks, you should learn how to calm your breathing in case you begin to hyperventilate. The key is to restore the balance of oxygen and carbon dioxide in your body, and a few techniques can accomplish this:

- **Holding your breath for 10 to 15 seconds**. This will help dissipate the carbon dioxide, bringing it back to normal levels. You may have to repeat this a few times before you can overcome the hyperventilation episode.
- **Breathing in and out of a paper bag**. When you inhale the air you've just exhaled, you're bringing in carbon dioxide to counter the over-abundance of oxygen that's making you hyperventilate.

- **Vigorous exercise**. Not everyone with AFib will prefer this method (some patients find that exercise triggers an AFib episode), but a brisk walk, short jog, or even a set of jumping jacks can reset your breathing pattern relatively quickly.

Stress is a trigger for so many conditions, and one of your biggest enemies if you suffer from AFib. Exercise happens to be one of the best ways to deal with stress, not to mention a direct route to lower blood pressure and less arterial plaque (major players in AFib complications). The resulting weight loss can even take care of your sleep apnea, or at least lessen the severity.

Finally, regular exercise will strengthen the heart and improve your lung function, which should help you counter an array of AFib risks and symptoms. If you haven't already begun a regular exercise routine, talk to your doctor about the best activities to strengthen your heart and lungs.