The Dangerous Link Between AFib and High Blood Pressure

by ANGELA FINLAY

Understanding How AFib and Hypertension Interact

Atrial fibrillation and coronary artery disease are different conditions – one is an electrical problem, the other is a structural problem – but they are related.

Not all AFib patients will develop the symptoms of heart disease (including high blood pressure), and not everyone with coronary heart disease will develop AFib, but it's clear that damage to the tissues in and around your heart from uncontrolled high blood pressure could eventually interfere with your internal electrical system.

Since high blood pressure and AFib can each dramatically increase your risk of stroke and heart failure, living with both conditions is especially dangerous. Working with your doctor, you'll need to pay close and ongoing attention to your health stats, medication regime and lifestyle changes to reduce your chances of complications.

How High Blood Pressure Leads to AFib

Not only can high blood pressure raise your chances of developing an arrhythmia, it may be the single biggest risk factor for AFib. The problem comes from the ongoing strain to the arteries and heart muscle, and when combined with other AFib risk factors (like obesity or genetic predisposition), it can slowly and silently build to a breaking point: the development of an electrical irregularity.

Damage to Arteries

When your blood pressure is too high, the force of blood against your artery walls can weaken and damage the arteries, which will hamper the flow of blood to and from the heart. Low blood flow (ischemia) that results from a blocked or damaged artery can interfere with the electrical signals in the heart and lead to AFib.

Changes in the Heart Muscle

Uncontrolled high blood pressure also appears to cause changes in the structure of the heart, setting the stage for the rapid, erratic heartbeat of AFib. In some cases, the atria will become enlarged — so much so that electrical signals misfire and blood begins to pool, raising the risk of stroke.

Although anyone could develop AFib under the right circumstances, experts agree that those who have been diagnosed with high blood pressure in middle age and fail to control it properly are most likely to develop AFib later on. An ideal blood pressure to aim for is 120/80mm Hg, but your doctor may prefer you to keep your numbers a bit lower, around 115/75, to reduce your risk even more.

Managing Blood Pressure and AFib Symptoms

Uncontrolled, hypertension and AFib will certainly put you at risk for life-threatening events, but the good news is

that there’s a lot you can do to control both conditions.

First, visit your doctor to discuss the details of your case: the more you know about your blood pressure numbers and your specific type of AFib, the better equipped you will be to manage each problem. Secondly, take medical advice and your personal responsibility seriously – your life depends on it.

Be Vigilant With Your Medication

The right medication is your first line of defense against hypertension and AFib symptoms, but you must take it religiously for long-term protection against stroke.

Hypertension and AFib call for different drugs, and each condition can complicate treatment of the other, so the type and amount of medication is very carefully chosen. Follow your doctor’s orders closely, and never stop taking anything (or adding anything) without medical advice.

Watch for Interactions

While it’s important to stay focused on your medication management, don’t ignore other diet and lifestyle factors that could interfere with your daily medicine. Vitamins, supplements, over-the-counter medications, and an alcoholic beverage or two may seem perfectly benign, but they have the ability to make your medications less effective – or bring on dangerous side effects. Warfarin is a commonly prescribed AFib medication, and it’s known to interact with vitamin K, vitamin E, and alcohol. Blood pressure medications can react negatively with common cold and allergy drugs, leading to higher blood pressure and a higher heart rate.

Learn to De-Stress

It’s no secret that stress is a major factor in high blood pressure, and many patients know that it can bring on an AFib episode (or exacerbate your symptoms). It follows that the less stress you live with, the less strain on your blood vessels and heart muscle, so start to incorporate stress-relieving techniques into each day.

Progressive muscle relaxation, art therapy, meditation and cognitive behavioural therapy are all effective stress reducers, but regular exercise may be the best therapy of all. Consider stress a dangerous environmental factor, like smoking or obesity: treat the problem at the source, and stick with your new lifestyle changes for a longer, more comfortable life.

Since hypertension can complicate AFib management, your doctor may want to consider a surgical procedure to reduce or eliminate the AFib altogether. Catheter ablation is a common, minimally invasive operation to stop the faulty electrical signal in your heart, but there are other procedures that could be more suitable to your case.

Alternatively, getting your blood pressure down to healthy levels could simplify your AFib management, and surgery may not be needed. Luckily, good self-care (a healthy diet, less alcohol consumption, maintaining a healthy weight, and consistent stress reduction) can help with both conditions, and may even allow you to reduce or eliminate your medication.