9 Myths About Atrial Fibrillation Busted

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Dispelling the Common Myths About AFib

Atrial fibrillation (AFib) is a common condition affecting millions of people worldwide. As with many diseases and chronic illness, there are many rumors and outdated information that exist regarding AFib. In order to be able to live your best life, you need to be aware of and consider these misconceptions and myths about AFib, so let's get the facts straight and separate truth from fiction.

1. AFib Only Affects the Elderly

While the likelihood of developing atrial fibrillation increases dramatically with age, young people can have the condition as well. It is more likely to arise in the presence of heart damage or disease among younger individuals.

2. Once Your Heart Rhythm Goes Into AFib, It Beats Abnormally for the Rest of Your Life

AFib may arise one time for just a few moments, sporadically, or continue long-term. With proper treatment, most people who have AFib develop a normal heart rhythm. In the case of chronic atrial fibrillation, medication is needed to maintain a normal rate and rhythm.

3. The Only Treatment for AFib Is Medication

While the most common treatment for atrial fibrillation is medication, additional therapies are sometimes needed.

Cardioversion is a planned intervention and treatment used to shock the heart back into a normal rhythm. It may be used in emergency situations when atrial fibrillation is severe and the victim is experiencing the treat of cardiovascular collapse.

A temporary or permanent pacemaker may need to be inserted as a treatment for atrial fibrillation. New permanent pacemakers are available that utilize minimally-invasive techniques. They only take 15 minutes to be inserted.

A surgical procedure called ablation may be required to treat AFib if other techniques fail.

4. People Who Have AFib Should Not Go on Long Trips

This is one of the most common myths about AFib, however, most people who have been diagnosed with AFib can travel safely. If you suffer from atrial fibrillation, check with your health care provider well in advance of a planned trip. By seeing your doctor in advance of your trip you will have time to be screened for potential health problems, complete medical tests if indicated, and ensure that you have effective medical treatment.

If you take warfarin, get blood tests done prior to departure. Learn where your PT/INR blood tests can be conducted while you are away. You can purchase testing units for home and travel, which will afford you with opportunities to do your own testing so you will not need to take time out for going to a lab for frequent tests.

While traveling, it is important that you stay hydrated and move around as often as possible. If you will be seated for long periods, change your position often. On road trips, stop, and get out of your car for a walk around every few hours.

5. People Who Have AFib Can't Fly in Planes

Air travel is perfectly fine for most people who have AFib. While high altitudes may increase your chance of developing an irregular heart rhythm, this is unlikely to occur while flying on a commercial jet. Pressurized cabins compensate for the effects of changes in altitude. Consult with your cardiologist before flying.

6. As Long as I Take Blood Thinners, I Do Not Have to Worry About Blood Clots Forming

If you have AFib, you have an increased risk for developing blood clots. While the use of blood thinners reduces that risk you can still develop clots, which most often form in the legs but can lodge anywhere in the body.

Learn the signs and symptoms of blood clots. Pain, heat, fever, redness and swelling may indicate a clot, particularly when symptoms appear in an extremity.

Chest pain, shortness of breath, and frothy or pink sputum are signs of pulmonary emboli.

Signs of stroke include an inability to speak, move normally, smile evenly, and think clearly. Visual changes may arise.

While most people who suffer a heart attack experience shortness of breath and chest pain, many individuals do not have these symptoms.

If you think you have blood clot, go to an emergency room. If you suffer from shortness of breath, chest pain, or think that you may be having a stroke, get emergency assistance immediately. Call for an ambulance without delay.

7. Blood Thinners, Regular Blood Tests and a Restricted Diet Are All I Can Do to Prevent Clots

Moving around frequently and getting regular exercise will help prevent blood clots and increase the health of your entire body. Make sure you drink plenty of water every day unless your cardiologist has prescribed a fluid restriction for you. Consuming adequate amounts of fluids prevents dehydration and blood clot formation.

8. The Relationship Between AFib and Heart Failure Is Unclear

While more information and research is needed, there are clear links between AFib and heart failure. Individuals who have atrial fibrillation are more likely than others to develop heart failure.

People who have heart failure have elevated risks of developing atrial fibrillation. Individuals who have both diagnoses are likely to experience poorer outcomes than individuals who have one of the two conditions. This is because atrial fibrillation and heart failure both cause the heart to work harder.

Hospitalized individuals who have both diagnoses are more likely than other individuals to need readmission to a hospital within one month of discharge. The risk of death increases when both diagnoses are present.

9. AFib Causes Weakness and Fatigue

If your heart is beating too fast you may not be getting enough oxygen to your tissues, and you may feel tired or weak. However, it is important that you seek medical attention. Weakness can be a sign of heart failure, stroke or thyroid disease.

You may be tired if you are stressed or not getting enough sleep. Low blood sugar levels can cause fatigue, as well.

Fatigue is often a first sign of an impending infectious disease such a colds or influenza. If you are experiencing fatigue or weakness, contact your health care provider. If it is sudden, severe, or accompanied by signs of stroke or heart failure, seek immediate medical attention.

Knowledge Helps You Live Well

If you or a loved one has been diagnosed with AFib, it is important that you learn as much as you can about the condition; this includes both the facts and the misconceptions and myths about AFib. Check with your cardiologist if you have questions.

If you have had AFib for a prolonged period of time and think you know all that you need to about the condition, it is important you continue to stay aware of current information so you receive the best care and experience optimal outcomes.