Research Shows AFibbers More Likely to Suffer Mental Decline

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Understanding Atrial Fibrillation and Memory Loss

You may have been diagnosed with atrial fibrillation (AFib) due to a routine electrocardiogram in your doctor's office. Or the onset may have been a bit scarier and more sudden — a rapid heartbeat with palpitations and chest pain that brought you urgently to the hospital.

Regardless of how you found out that you had AFib, my guess is that you were educated on your condition by your cardiologist and the nurses taking care of you. It was probably made very clear to you that AFib is an abnormal heart rhythm caused by the atrium of the heart fibrillating instead of fully pumping blood — hence the name "atrial fibrillation."

You were probably educated on AFib and stroke risk. Strokes are the biggest risk with AFib, an can happen because the blood that doesn't pump fully through the atrium can pool, causing a blood clot to form. The blood clot, when it eventually does pass through the heart, can cause a stroke.

To reduce your risk of stroke, you probably started taking blood thinners immediately. Which brought on more worries! Diet restrictions, activity restrictions, constantly worrying about the INR!

As you learned all of this, and entered into your "new life" as a person with AFib, you may not have been told that recent research suggests that people with AFib may have an increased risk of dementia and general mental decline sooner than those without AFib.

Why?

Recent research at the University of Alabama in Birmingham shows that people with AFib have memory problems that start or worsen at an earlier age than those without AFib.

The study is able to show that brain health and heart health are related. However, it does have one downside — it didn't pinpoint exactly *why* people with AFib have this cause-and-effect relationship.

The lead researcher, Evan Thacker, a statistician in the department of epidemiology, believes that there are two possibilities.

As we already know, people with AFib are at an increased risk for stroke. One possibility is that small clots are reaching the brain — these clots are too small to cause any noticeable stroke, but the culmination may lead to the mental decline.

Thacker's other theory is that perhaps people with AFib have less blood flow to the brain — and less blood flow to the brain means less oxygen to the brain. If the brain isn't getting enough oxygen, it isn't getting the proper nourishment, which could potentially lead to a decline in mental function.

Thacker notes that both theories are just that — theories. He would like to further his research using brain imaging to study the brains of people with AFib. Figuring out the *why* could lead to how to prevent the problem from occurring in the first place.

Prevention of Mental Decline

Dr. Mina Chung, a cardiologist specializing in atrial fibrillation at Cleveland Clinic, notes that some dementia is probably caused by silent strokes inadvertently caused by AFib. Because of this, people with AFib and stroke risk factors are strongly recommended to be prescribed anticoagulant medications.

Dr. Chung went on to say, “The blood vessels in the heart and the brain are the same. They’re located in different organs, but they’re all the same. When you’re doing things to keep your heart healthy, your brain benefits too.”

Brain Fog

The mental decline may be inevitable at this point in time, but that doesn’t mean that there aren’t things you can’t do to tell better!

You may have heard the term “brain fog” before. According to Dr. Mady Hornig, associate professor of epidemiology at Columbia University Medical Center in New York City, “Brain fog is the inability to really punch through. It’s a vague sense of what you’re trying to retrieve, but you can’t focus on it, and the effort the thought can be as draining as physical activity.”

Here are a few tips on dealing with brain fog:

- **Eat an iron-rich diet.** You may have upped your intake of certain anti-oxidant rich foods, such as fish, dark chocolate, leafy greens and berries but iron is essential for memory.
- **Seek second opinions.** Your brain fog may simply be the result of AFib, but there are countless other diseases that have brain fog as a symptom, such as lupus, multiple sclerosis, fibromyalgia and myalgic encephalomyelitis (previously known as chronic fatigue syndrome).
- **Cut out gluten.** People with celiac disease obviously must abstain from gluten, but people with other autoimmune disease may also feel better by removing it from their diet.

Since we now know that people with AFib are at an increased risk for mental decline and dementia, we need to continue to research why this occurs and how to prevent it from happening; AFib is present in about three million Americans. Not only that but it increases the risk of stroke by fivefold!