10 Healthy Habits for Living with AFib

by PATRICIA BRATIANU

Lifestyle Changes for People Living with AFib

If you have a diagnosis of atrial fibrillation, you know that taking your medication and seeing your doctor regularly are important for your cardiovascular health. But did you know you can take steps at home to improve your health, too?

By adopting a few healthy habits that benefit your heart and blood vessels, you improve the health of every cell in your body. Let's take a look at some of the most important actions you can take to ensure you live a long, healthy life despite having AFib.

1. Track Your Blood Pressure

This is one of the most important actions to take if you want to live well despite AFib. People who have AFib have an increased risk of congestive heart failure and stroke, and so it is extremely important to prevent and treat hypertension, also known as high blood pressure. Maintaining your blood pressure within normal limits prevents heart failure and stroke.

Even if you do not have a history of hypertension, have your blood pressure checked at least once each month. Free blood pressure clinics are often available throughout the community; you can take advantage of blood pressure machines found in pharmacies and grocery stores. Record your blood pressure and the date each time that you check it. Try to take it in the same arm and at the same time of day.

Keeping track of your blood pressure is a great tool for evaluating if your other heart healthy interventions are effective. If you have hypertension, follow your health care provider's recommendations for managing it. Generally speaking, blood pressure readings that are consistently 140/80 or higher are classified as hypertension.

2. Eat Well

A healthy diet will provide your body with the nutrients it needs to function optimally. Diets rich in fresh produce supply the body with low-calorie nutrients that lower levels of unhealthy cholesterol and prevent aging.

Choosing the right foods also keeps your blood vessels flexible and reduces hypertension. A low-fat, primarily plant-based diet is best. This will also help you maintain a healthy weight, which is important because being overweight is a risk factor for heart disease.

Opt for simple whole foods and avoid processed foods as they are nutrient poor and can increase inflammation within your body, which is linked to cardiovascular and other serious health problems. Limit your intake of meat and animal products as well, as these also increase inflammation.

Try to eat more foods that contain healthy essential fatty acids, like salmon, mackerel, herring, halibut, and flax

and hemp seeds, buy avoid saturated and polyunsaturated fats.

Consider snacking tree nuts, such as walnuts, as these offer protective benefits for your heart and blood vessels.

Ask your health care provider for a referral to a nutritionist for customized advice.

3. Take Steps to Reduce Injury

If you have atrial fibrillation, you probably take a blood thinning medication. Be sure to take your medication exactly as prescribed, get laboratory tests as ordered, and report any signs of internal or external bleeding to your health care provider.

Prevent injuries by using gloves when performing work outdoors. Use electric shavers rather than razors, and take care when you are using knives and scissors. Pay attention to your environment so to prevent bumps and bruises.

Follow your doctor's dietary recommendations regarding foods which interfere with the action of anticoagulant medications.

4. Reduce and Manage Stress Effectively

Episodes of AFib may arise during periods of stress. Examine your life. Are there people in your life who you need to have less contact with? Do you need to speak up more? Would participating in a spiritual community, such as a church or synagogue, be beneficial for you? Does your environment cause you stress? Do you need to downsize?

Are your expectations of yourself and your loved ones too high? Are you comfortable delegating tasks? How are your organizational skills? Is your home cluttered? Is it time to cut back on activities that you no longer enjoy? Does the thought of trying a new hobby excite you?

As the saying goes, "life is short." Look at your life. Take steps to reduce stressors in your life. You will not only reduces the likelihood of having an episode of atrial fibrillation, you will enjoy your life more and be energized.

Next page: six more tips for healthy living with AFib, including having a glass of red wine, and making time for exercise.

5. Have a Glass of Red Wine

A glass of red wine each day can help you to relax and it improves your circulation. It contains a plant compound called resveratrol, which enhances the health of your circulation.

However, avoid excess alcohol consumption as it can damage your heart and blood vessels. Regular excessive consumption of alcohol increases blood pressure; particularly in your vital organs including the liver and kidneys.

White wines, beer and hard liquors do not offer the protective benefits red wine provides, and contain empty calories that can contribute to weight gain.

If you prefer not to drink alcohol, supplements of resveratrol are available. Follow instructions on the product label.

6. Try Herbs to Promote Cardiovascular Health

Many herbs have been traditionally used and proven by modern research to benefit circulation. You

probably already have some of them at home.

- **Garlic:** reduces levels of unhealthy LDL cholesterol and helps your body to maintain a healthy blood pressure.
- **Ginger:** is a mildly stimulating warming herb that has been used by Ayurvedic and traditional Chinese medicine practitioners for thousands of years as an aid for circulation.
- **Cayenne pepper:** dilates blood vessels and improves circulation throughout all of the tissues of the body.
- **Hawthorn:** is a common shrub which balances blood pressure. It is unlike pharmaceuticals in that small amounts of hawthorn are used to increase the blood pressure if it is low, while larger doses reduce hypertension. It also improves cardiac function, relieving tension in the blood vessels and keeping them strong and flexible.
- **Dandelion leaf:** is a fabulous source of vitamins and minerals. It relieves the body of excess fluid. Unlike diuretic pharmaceutical medications, dandelion provides the body with healthy potassium rather than depleting it of the mineral.
- **Olive leaf:** promotes blood vessel relaxation, which aids flexibility and supports a healthy blood pressure. It also contains many beneficial antioxidant compounds.

7. Get Some Exercise

Exercise reduces stress and inflammation as well as improving cardiovascular health and general wellness. After exercising, your body maintains a higher metabolic rate for several hours after you cease activity, which serves to increase your energy level and enhance weight loss.

If you are like most people, when you think about improving circulation you think of your blood. However other types of circulation also occur in your body. The fluid in your brain and spinal cord circulates, as does your lymph fluid. Exercise is the best means for promoting the circulation of all your body's fluids.

Yoga, swimming, walking and rebounding exercises all promote the healthy flow of fluids throughout your body.

8. Don't Smoke or Chew Tobacco

Tobacco causes your blood vessels to constrict and harden and your blood pressure to increase throughout your entire body. The critical veins and arteries that connect with your heart and lungs become stressed and your chance of having a heart attack or stroke increases dramatically.

Do yourself a favor and avoid smoking at all costs.

9. Spend Time in Nature

Multiple research studies prove that spending time in natural environments is beneficial for health and wellness. Hypertension is reduced and stress levels are lowered. People who spend time in nature report less pain and increased feelings of connection and wellbeing. All of these factors enhance the health of your heart and blood vessels.

10. Get Regular Checkups

See your health care provider on a regular basis and obtain diagnostic tests as ordered. By identifying potential problems early, you will have better outcomes for the rest of your life.