Get the Most Out of Your Atrial Fibrillation Appointments

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Optimizing Atrial Fibrillation Appointments With Your Family Doctor or Cardiologist

If you suspect that you may have atrial fibrillation (AFib), you must go to see your family doctor as soon as possible. If this heart condition is discovered early on, it could mean that your treatment(s) will be less complicated and more effective. Your primary healthcare provider will likely refer you to a cardiologist (i.e., a doctor specializing in heart disorders), and there, you'll want to prepare for your atrial fibrillation appointments.

Appointment Preparations:

1. **Make yourself aware of pre-appointment restrictions, if any:** When you book your appointment, make sure to enquire about any pre-appointment restrictions (e.g., fasting for blood certain tests).
2. **Make a detailed list of any signs or symptoms you are having:** This includes those that may seem completely unrelated to atrial fibrillation.
3. **Note any key pieces of personal information:** This includes other medical conditions, any known family history of heart disease or stroke, elevated blood pressure, diabetes, as well as recent life changes and/or stressors.
4. **Take all medications, vitamins and/or supplements that you are currently taking with you to your initial appointment**.
5. **Have either a family member or friend go with you, if possible:** They may remember something that you forgot or missed. An extra “set of ears” can be valuable, especially if you are stressed.

Questions, Questions

To optimize the time you spend with your family doctor and/or cardiologist, compile a list of questions to take to your appointment(s). Questions should be prioritized from most important to least important in case time runs out. Some basic questions related to AFib include:

- What are the possible conditions that could be causing my signs and symptoms?
- What tests will I require to confirm a diagnosis?
- What are the most appropriate treatments and/or medication(s) in my particular case?
- What alternatives are there to the primary AFib treatment(s)?
- Are there any generic alternative(s) to the medication(s) being prescribed?
- What sort of foods/drinks should I consume lots of? Avoid?
- What kind of physical activities can I participate in?
- Are there any other restrictions that I may need to follow?
- How often do I need to come back for atrial fibrillation checkups?
- How can I best manage my other health conditions along with AFib?
- Are there educational brochures I can take home with me and/or any websites I can visit to learn more about my heart condition?

Do not hesitate to ask any other questions that come to mind during your appointment.

Expectations of Your Doctor or Specialist:

Be ready for your doctor to ask you certain questions:

- Do you remember when you first started having your heart symptoms?
- Do they occur continuously or only occasionally?
- Can you rate the severity of your symptoms?
- Does anything appear to make your symptoms better?
- Does anything appear to make your symptoms worse?

To properly diagnose atrial fibrillation, your doctor will likely go over your medical/family history, perform a physical exam and order several tests, including the following:

- ECG (i.e., electrocardiogram) – records electrical signals as they move throughout your heart.
- Holter Monitor – portable ECG that records heart activity for at least 24 hours.
- Blood Tests – to rule out other medical conditions.
- X-rays – help to visualize the condition of the heart and lungs.
- Echocardiogram - utilizes sound waves to produce a video image of the heart.

Generally speaking, the goals of atrial fibrillation treatment(s) are twofold:

- To control the heart rate and/or reset the heart’s irregular rhythm.
- To prevent the formation of blood clots.

It is essential to follow all treatments exactly as ordered, to optimize your long-term outcomes.