Coping with AFib in the Hot Summer Months

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Managing Atrial Fibrillation in Summer

Atrial fibrillation (AFib) is a condition that causes a fast, fluttering heart beat called arrhythmia. The American Heart Association reports at least 2.7 million Americans are living with AFib.

Symptoms of AFib include general fatigue, rapid or irregular heartbeat, dizziness, weakness, shortness of breath, faintness or confusion, sweating, or chest pain and pressure. Chest pain or pressure is a medical emergency and you should call 911 immediately.

Summer Months and AFib Symptoms

Hot and humid weather is unpleasant for most people, but it can be very dangerous if you have AFib. Therefore, it is important for you to know the risks of hot weather and take precautions during the during the summer months. Managing atrial fibrillation in summer months can be difficult, but it is certainly not impossible.

Being outdoors during extremely hot weather takes a toll on your body and increases your chance of an AFib attack. An AFib attack causes symptoms of heart palpitations, rapid heartbeat, chest pain, and extreme anxiety.

One 2013 report out of the University of Parma, Italy, confirms that atmospheric factors, especially temperature and humidity between the end of July and the first two weeks of August, correlate with AFib incidences and attacks.

Of note is that more AFib patients were admitted to emergency rooms for AFib attacks in the middle of the summer than any other time of the year.

How Heat Stresses Your Heart

The human body rids itself of excess heat in two ways that stress the heart.

The first is evaporation, or sweating, which cools your body and removes a number of minerals critical for keeping normal heart rhythm.

The second way, radiation, moves blood to surface to cool it and causes the heart to work harder.

Your heart issues themselves can reduce your body’s ability to shed heat, which could send your heart into arrhythmia. Your AFib medications may also affect your body’s ability to cool.

Here are six precautions to take during the summer months to help you avoid an AFib attack:

Stay Hydrated

Dehydration is a recognized trigger of AFib attacks but staying hydrated isn't always easy. Dehydration could also be a side effect of some of your heart medications.

On very hot days, try drinking a glass of water every hour. Stay away from sodas and other sugary drinks and avoid caffeine or alcohol because they worsen dehydration. Alcohol dilates blood vessels which may lower blood pressure and stress your heart. Caffeine excites and speeds up the heart.

Eat Light

Stay away from hot meals and eat smaller meals. Try cold soups, fruits, and salads to give you extra fluid, keeping you cool and eating well and heathy.

Stay Indoors and Stay Cool

Air conditioning is the best way to avoid the heat. Fans aren't helpful on very hot days because they end up blowing hot air.

If you don't have an air conditioner, spend a couple hours in a mall or at a store or another place with air conditioning. Or take a cool shower or bath or put a cold wash cloth to your head.

Wear Lighter Clothing

Make sure you wear lightweight and light colored clothing outdoors, especially during the hottest hours. Light clothing is less likely to trap heat or warm your body further.

Exercise and Stay Indoors

Put off exercising with AFib until it is cooler outside. Evening and mornings are the best times for cooler temperatures and less humidity. If you do exercise during the day, exercise in an air-conditioned area and drink more than usual.

The National Weather Service issues excess heart warnings, alerts, and outlooks. Pay attention to any weather service warnings and if an excessive heat warning has been issued, change any outdoor activities to early and late hours.

Don't Go Out Alone on Hot Days

Since the risk of an AFib episode is much higher on very hot days, you should not be alone when you are outdoors. Make sure the person you are with understands you have AFib and what to do in an emergency situation.

If you do have an AFib attack, get yourself out of the heat, remove clothing and cool your body down either with a shower or damp wash cloths. If you are having chest pain, severe dizziness, or vomiting, go to your local emergency room or call 911.

Pay Attention to Symptoms of Heat Exhaustion

High body temperature and/or hydration can lead to heat exhaustion. Symptoms include dizziness, clammy skin, headache, cramping, and a rapid heartbeat.

It is important to keep your heart safe during the hot days of the summer months. If you think you are having symptoms of heat exhaustion or AFib, get to an air-conditioned place and drink cold water or sports drinks.

If heat exhaustion symptoms continue for an hour, call your doctor or go to your local hospital's emergency

department.