Is Atrial Fibrillation Fatal?

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Finding out there is something wrong with your heart is scary. Undoubtedly a lot of things go through your mind – how is it treated? What kinds of things will I need to change in my life? Is Atrial Fibrillation fatal? Am I going to die?

Well, I have good news – AFib is generally not fatal. However, it can cause life-threatening complications if it isn't treated appropriately.

What is AFib?

It is a good idea to have an understanding of what AFib is and why it is so important to treat it.

AFib is an abnormal heart rhythm that affects more than 2 million Americans, generally in adults aged 60 and older.

It occurs when the top of the heart – the atria – quivers as opposed to pumping. In a heart that is working efficiently, the atria pump the blood into the lungs. When the heart is quivering, not only is the heart not pumping blood effectively, the timing of the contractions of the heart is out of sync.

Typically when your doctor listens to your heart, they hear a "lub-dup" sound. When they listen to your heart when you have AFib, the sounds they hear are erratic because the quivering is erratic – only the ventricle (the lower part of the heart) is pumping at its regular pace.

So, what Is the problem with AFib?

When the atria are quivering and not pumping blood effectively, blood can pool in the atria. This pooled blood can basically "sit" in the atria, forming a blood clot. If the blood clot ever gets pumped into circulation, you can sustain a stroke.

The Statistics

Because AFib is relatively common, we've been able to ascertain a number of statistics related to AFib.

- 15 percent of strokes are related to untreated AFib.
- 2.7 million Americans have AFib, making it the most common heart arrhythmia.
- A person who is in a normal sinus rhythm (our "normal" heart rhythm) has atria that contract 60 to 80 times per minute, while someone who is in AFib has atria that contract (or quiver) 300 to 400 times per minute.
- 1 out of 100 people in their 50s has AFib, but that number increases to 10 out 100 in their 80s.

- Taking warfarin can reduce stroke risk by 65%.
- Taking aspirin can reduce stroke risk by 45%.

When Atrial Fibrillation Is Fatal

AFib on its own does not cause death – death typically occurs as a result of a stroke. Seeking emergency medical attention at the first signs and symptoms of both AFib and stroke can significantly decrease the risk of complications.

Cardiac Rhythm News also notes that sudden cardiac death is also a common cause of death in AFib patients – and accounts for death in a third of all deaths.

In a study performed by Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston and Harvard Medical School, this statistic was unearthed – and it was found that the majority of the deaths were men at the age of 73. Researchers noted, "future prospective studies should examine whether these modifications in treatment can reduce the risk of sudden cardiac death in patients with atrial fibrillation."

One thing to point out, though – you can certainly read the statistic of "one-third of all deaths" as being very scary. But, keep in mind that this is NOT one-third of all people with AFib – this does not mean that just because you have AFib, you will die from AFib. Reading statistics can be scary – until you put them in perspective.

Stroke Symptoms

One positive thing you can do for yourself? If you have AFib it is essential that you know stroke symptoms.

The American Stroke Association created the following acronym to teach people how to identify stroke and how to seek medical attention immediately:

- **F**ace Drooping
- **A**rm Weakness
- **S**peech Difficulty
- **T**ime to Call 9-1-1