5 Self-Care Tips for People Living With AFib

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Healthy Self-Care for People Living with Atrial Fibrillation

Atrial fibrillation (AFib) is a common heart arrhythmia affecting the atria's ability to contract and thus limits the amount of blood transported to the ventricles. The American Heart Association estimates that 2.7 million people in the United States suffer from this condition.

If you have AFib, you have likely experienced symptoms of AFib such as a racing heartbeat, pounding in your chest, fatigue, shortness of breath, and dizziness.

One of the most important steps you can take for living with atrial fibrillation is to adopt effective self-care habits to improve nutrition, physical activity, sleep, and mental health patterns.

Nutrition Tips

Currently, there are no disease-specific nutrition guidelines for AFib. However, following heart-healthy dietary recommendations will help you manage your weight and energy levels, and reduce risk factors leading to other chronic conditions.

The following "heart-smart" nutritional habits will provide the best opportunity to control your AFib:

- Avoid foods high in trans fats to keep your cholesterol and triglyceride levels within the range your physician recommends.
- Consume lots of multicolored fresh and frozen fruits and vegetables on a weekly basis.
- Choose lean cuts of meat, keep your intake of red meat at a moderate level, and eat fish at two to three meals per week.
- Limit your use of canned, packaged, and processed foods to only what is necessary.
- Replace salt used for cooking and seasoning with other herbs and spices, which helps regulate blood pressure and reduces the risk of stroke
- If you are taking an anticoagulant medication like warfarin, consult with your physician if you are considering increasing your consumption of foods high in vitamin K. Raising vitamin K levels in your bloodstream can elevate your risk for stroke because vitamin K boosts clotting factors.

It's also essential to reach and maintain a healthy weight because excess pounds place increased strain on the heart muscle.

According to Dr. Christine Albert, director of the Center for Arrhythmia Prevention at Brigham and Women's Hospital, people who are overweight carry extra fat around the heart's pericardial layer, which can interfere with regular electrical activity.

If you're unsure how to start, consider visiting with a registered dietitian.

Exercise and Physical Activity Tips

Regular exercise helps improve your physical strength and stamina and aids in combating the adverse effects of many chronic diseases.

Aerobic exercises like walking, swimming, biking, and using and equipment like a rowing machine help to condition the heart muscle, so it pumps more efficiently.

Performing resistance training like lifting weights or using stretchable rubber tubing or your body weight increases muscle strength and reduces the workload of physical activity on your heart and lungs.

Following a regular stretching program improves your joint flexibility as well as your range of motion.

Have a conversation with your physician to find out if it's safe for you to exercise, what activities are best for you, and your target intensity level. If you're new to exercise or have minimal experience, ask for a referral to a certified professional or medically supervised exercise program.

Mental Health and Stress Management Tips

People living with atrial fibrillation often experience anxiety and depression because of the uncertainty that accompanies the ailment. For some individuals, psychological stress can trigger an episode, especially those who have intermittent AFib.

Learning about AFib from your healthcare team and trusted information sources will help you to understand the condition better and lessen your worries and concerns. Ask questions every time have an appointment with your providers to find out the facts about AFib.

If you work full-time or part-time, block off time each day after work for relaxation. Take part in activities you enjoy to develop a consistent work-life balance.

If you're overwhelmed by life's responsibilities, ask friends, neighbors, and family members for aid with some of those duties. Consider visiting with a mental health professional if you're having difficulty coping with your situation.

Rest and Sleep Tips

Getting enough rest and sleep is one of the most vital ways you can take care of your body and mind, regardless of your health status. Trouble sleeping and having difficulty getting quality sleep can cause significant problems for AFib sufferers.

Recent research has shown that inadequate sleep can lead to the development and recurrence of AFib. Two studies presented at the 2016 American Heart Association annual meeting showed a link between insufficient sleep levels and an increased risk of AFib episodes.

Practicing good sleep hygiene is a crucial component for establishing and maintaining a healthy sleep pattern. Take these steps to improve your sleep hygiene:

- Keep your bedroom dark and maintain a cool temperature.
- Turn in and get up at the same time daily.
- Turn off all electronic devices, including the bedroom TV, at least 30 minutes before you're ready to go to sleep.
- Use your bed for two things: sex or sleep.
- Avoid physical exertion for at least one hour before going to bed.
- Establish a routine to help you unwind and relax before you're ready to sleep.

Take rest breaks during the day if you need them but avoid taking long naps because they will interfere with your nightly sleep pattern.

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Control and Remove Known AFib Triggers Tips

If you have specific physiologic or psychologic events that can trigger AFib episodes, make an effort to control them.

Some types of AFib triggers may include:

- Drinking cold liquids or caffeinated beverages such as coffee, tea, soda pop, or energy drinks.
- Hot water exposure (bath, shower, hot tub).
- Becoming too fatigued due to overexertion or lack of sleep.
- Consuming alcoholic beverages.
- Smoking.
- Excessive psychological stress.

If you are considering using over-the-counter medications or nutritional supplements, talk to your doctor before taking them. Each of these contains substances that could aggravate AFib.

Developing and implementing the right self-care plan is a significant stepping stone in helping you manage your AFib so that you achieve a healthy and satisfying quality of life. Work with your physician and other healthcare professionals on your team to design a blueprint that is realistic, flexible and best fits your needs and expectations.