Flying With AFib: What to Know Before You Go

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Flying With Atrial Fibrillation: Is It Safe to Fly With AFib?

Many people enjoy traveling, whether it's for a long-awaited vacation or a holiday trip to visit friends or family. Regardless of your reasons or destination, air travel is often the quickest and most convenient way to get there.

Airlines have improved their customer safety measures over the years, and now have the equipment and trained staff to accommodate individuals with health problems as well as the rare medical emergency.

Many people have no difficulties flying, but it is often a drawback for people with atrial fibrillation (AFib) because of concerns over such things as changes in altitude and cabin pressure. AFib sufferers also worry about sitting for long periods of time, which could lead to the development of blood clots.

The good news about AFib and air travel is that it is safe if you receive medical clearance from your physician, especially if you're flying to a higher altitude area such as in the mountains, and take wise safety measures before, during, and after your flight.

Pre-Flight Precautions: Tips for Preparing for Air Travel With Atrial Fibrillation

As mentioned earlier, always get the okay from your physician before making your flight arrangements.

It is vital that your symptoms are under control before you travel to reduce the risk of an unexpected episode or an exacerbation. If you have uncontrolled AFib, your physician will advise you against flying.

Pre-planning will help to reduce the stress and anxiety of all the steps involved with air travel which can decrease the chances of an AFib episode. Use the following guidelines as your "pre-flight checklist."

- Prepare your medications to include extra doses to ensure that you don't run out, particularly if traveling to a country where aren't fluent in the language. Keep an updated list with you at all times.
- Wear a medic alert bracelet that lists your name, emergency contact information, your medications, and any implanted medical devices.
- Keep your physician's name and contact information with you always.
- Find out from your physician if the area your traveling to has a hospital can handle an AFib emergency, and if he knows of a specialist there that he can recommend if needed.
- Find out if the hospital or clinic at your destination can provide anticoagulation testing (if you're on an anticoagulant) and can handle issues with pacemakers or AICD's if you have one of these.
- Consider purchasing travel insurance for your trip as many companies provide the service for a specific fee. Take some time to conduct a thorough Internet search to find a health insurance provider that will give you the best price on coverage that meets your needs.
- Schedule your flights so that you aren't rushed to make your connections.
- Go to bed early or at least on time the night before your trip to allow yourself a good night's sleep, so you

are well rested for your first travel day.
- Arrive early at the airport, so you're not rushed at check-in and when passing through security checkpoints. Allowing yourself extra time will create a cushion in case unforeseen events arise and help reduce anxiety and stress.
- If you have a pacemaker or AICD, alert security before you go through the checkpoint. The American Heart Association indicates that people with pacemakers and AICD's air in no significant danger when traveling by air.

In-Flight AFib Precautions: How Does Altitude Affect Atrial Fibrillation?

A primary concern for people with AFib is how that change in altitude of the flight will affect their condition.

A study in 2010 by the British Cardiovascular Society in the journal Heart reports that altitude and cabin pressure changes while airborne demonstrated no adverse risks for people prone to arrhythmias

One of the main complications with increased elevation is dehydration. Start increasing your water intake a day or two before your flight and continue drinking more than usual on the days you are flying.

Curtail or avoid caffeine and alcohol intake as this will improve your hydration level. Fatigue is another side effect of increased altitude, so try to sleep on the flight when you can.

Other smart tips to follow during your flight include:

- Get out of your seat and walk around every 30 minutes or so to prevent blood clots from developing in your legs, which will help prevent a stroke.
- Sit with your legs straight as often as possible, and don't cross your legs because this will cause problems with your blood pressure. Don't have your knees bent for more than 60 minutes at a time.
- If your flight duration is long, think about wearing support stockings to improve blood flow and blood clot risk and swelling.
- Avoid extreme cold or heat and adjust your seats air conditioning or heat vent as needed.

Post-Flight AFib Precautions: What to Do Next When You're Off the Plane

After you have arrived at your destination, take your time disembarking and walking to baggage claim. Even with short flights, most people underestimate their level of fatigue.

If your destination point is at a higher altitude than your departure point, you will need to follow these guidelines:

- Reduce your activity level to less than usual for several days to account for travel fatigue and to give your body a chance to adapt to the change in elevation. An individual requires 7 to 10 days to acclimate to the increased altitude due to the drop in oxygen concentration in the atmosphere, and your heart will have to work harder to pull in the amount your body needs for healthy function.
- Be aware of the signs and symptoms of altitude sickness, which include dizziness, decreased appetite, fatigue, headache, nausea, shortness of breath, sleep disturbances, and vomiting.
- Continue to keep your water intake above normal levels to avoid dehydration. Restrict your consumption of alcohol, caffeine, and salty foods until you return home.
- Schedule more periods of rest and try to sleep more than usual to compensate for travel fatigue. Feeling overtired is an AFib trigger for many people.
- Observe for any new signs or symptoms or a worsening of your condition.

Regardless of whether you are at the preflight, in-flight, or post-flight stage, seek help immediately if you experience a new AFib episode, controlled AFib that becomes uncontrolled, or if you have chest pain or symptoms of stroke.

Taking steps ahead of time to put a well thought out plan in place like the one mentioned above will help you limit

your stress level and reduce the risk of an AFib episode.