# Avoid These Common AFib Triggers to Improve Quality of Life

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## Common Triggers of AFib Episodes

An AFib episode can't always be traced to a trigger, but many people with AFib can pinpoint at least a few ingredients, events, or procedures that exacerbate their symptoms. And sometimes those triggers are not what they expected.

Although it's handy to know about common AFib triggers, don't assume that one fact applies to all patients, all the time. Sure, some irritants are obvious – smoking, alcohol, and medications – but there may be other problems lurking in the shadows, and those can bring you unnecessary stress and substantial health risks.

Like your AFib symptoms, your particular set of triggers is unique, and it's important to devote some time and attention to finding them now for better health in the years to come.

### Food Sensitivities

It's well known that alcohol or too much coffee with AFib can send your heart rhythm off track, but even some seemingly healthy foods can interfere with your the management of your condition. Those who suffer from allergies know just how powerful natural ingredients can be, and AFib patients should take similar precautions when it comes to dietary choices:

- **Grapefruit.** Natural fruit juice is full of vitamins, but not all the compounds found in fruit are helpful for everybody. In fact, grapefruit contains a chemical called naringenin, which can interfere with Cordarone and Tikosyn (popular antiarrhythmic drugs). It may also alter the way your body processes other sorts of medication.
- **Vitamin K.** It's an important vitamin, and no problem at all for most people, but vitamin K can interfere with warfarin – the leading blood thinning medication for AFib. If you are taking warfarin, you'll need to limit your intake of spinach, kale, parsley, cauliflower, and green tea.
- **Dehydration**. Sometimes it's the lack of a dietary staple that causes the heart to misfire, and in many cases, that substance is water. Many people don't realize how quickly and deeply dehydration can set in, especially since the early warning signs are subtle. But as fatigue or muscle ache turns into thirst, you're already pretty far down that path.
  Dehydration is never a healthy state, but the mineral imbalance that results can be especially troublesome for AFib patients. Electrolytes in general – and potassium in particular – are crucial for heart health, and electrolyte levels plummet when you're dehydrated. One of the easiest ways to protect against AFib attacks is to stay well hydrated, which means increasing your water intake when you're sick, if you've been sweating, or neglecting your usual healthy eating habits.

### How Different Stressors Trigger AFib

It may not be a physical feature in your surroundings, but stress is a part of your immediate environment, and how

you handle it can make a big difference for your heart. It comes in a variety of physical and emotional forms, but the body's reaction to stress is often the same – a "fight or flight" response that will stimulate your heart and adrenal system.

- **Medical procedures.** AFib is the most common complication after heart surgery, and will affect between 20% and 30% of patients. But other types of operations are also physically stressful for the heart, and even relatively mild dental procedures can trigger an AFib response. Be sure to discuss your heart issue with your doctor and surgeon before signing off on any surgical procedure.
- **Exercise.** Regular activity is important for a strong heart, but there's a delicate balance: too much stress on your heart can provoke AFib symptoms, and too little can lead to a weaker cardiovascular system. Intervals of moderate exercise no longer than 30 minutes should be fine, but speak with your doctor about which activities are ideal, and which ones you should avoid.
- **Emotional burden.** Carrying a lot of psychological stress can manifest in physical forms. An intensely stressful situation can send a shot of adrenaline to your heart, but ongoing stress is equally harmful: as your body continues to release stress hormones like cortisone, your organs continue to respond, which means a lot of extra work for your heart.
- **Fatigue.** It may seem like the opposite of stress, but fatigue can burden your body, too. When you're fatigued, your body cannot operate as efficiently as it should, and that can lead to AFib symptoms. It's important to rest well, and improve your sleep hygiene so you don't become over-tired and confuse your natural stress response.

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## Dealing with Dangerous Combinations

Once you've uncovered a specific trigger, it's not so difficult to avoid it during your everyday life. But when you stray from your daily routine, it can be difficult to acknowledge, separate, and track different triggers. In some circumstances, these can add up and put you at even greater risk:

### Holidays and Celebrations

Even happy, lively gatherings can cause unpleasant symptoms. In fact, "holiday heart" is a surprisingly common condition for AFib sufferers, where alcohol use, overeating, fatigue, and overstimulation put a lot of stress on your body. And since you're likely to be distracted from small physical warning signs when there's a party going on, you could find yourself in the middle of an uncomfortable AFib attack before you know it.

Alcohol is a top trigger for AFib, and it also affects everyone a bit differently. Some people can have a drink or two without any noticeable physiological change, but for others, half a beer may be too much. Know your limit – and don't test it!

### Travel

Long trips throw a wrench into your regular routine, and can bring about a host of AFib triggers before you even reach your destination. Fatigue, dehydration, and changes to sleep patterns are almost guaranteed when air travel is involved, unless you take some measures to counteract the challenges.

Keep your body from reverting to the fight or flight response by resting and recharging at regular intervals. This means drinking water – more than you think you need – and taking naps as needed, or at least practicing deep breathing and calming visualization exercises.

### Recovering from Illness

Many AFib patients must take some form of medication to manage their symptoms, but even when the condition is under control, you aren't immune from common, minor illnesses.

An infection can be taxing, but treating the illness can cause problems if the medication doesn’t mesh well with your AFib drugs. Even pain relievers could be problematic: caffeine is a common ingredient in many brands, and even a modest amount can affect heart rhythm in susceptible people.

When you live with another chronic inflammatory like RA or asthma, you could face an even greater challenge. Steroids have recently been tied to a greater AFib risk, and receiving high-dose steroid therapy could trigger an AFib episode. In the end, the better you record your medications, new symptoms or illness, and changes in your environment, the better you can find and avoid your AFib triggers.