How Alcohol Use Affects Those with Atrial Fibrillation

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AFib and Alcohol

For the many of us worldwide who live with atrial fibrillation (AF), making healthy lifestyle changes is a crucial step to help us take charge of our lives and better manage the disease. Because AF is a type of heart rhythm disorder, making wise choices that lead to positive heart health outcomes will improve our quality of life.

Focusing on eating unprocessed foods, establishing and maintaining a regular exercise routine, getting consistent good quality sleep, and controlling our stress levels by learning and incorporating effective ways to manage our mental health all help to decrease the harmful effects of various types of heart disease.

One more lifestyle change can have a profound impact on our ability to manage AF: understanding the guidelines for AFib and alcohol use.

Many people have heard that a glass of red wine with a meal is beneficial for our heart because it can reduce our risk of stroke as well as other types of heart disease. For those of us with AF, is that true, and if so, how much alcohol consumption is genuinely safe?

Does Alcohol Use Cause AF?

A recent study shows a strong correlation between consuming one to three alcoholic drinks every 24 hours and triggering a new onset of AF. When people consume more than three drinks daily, the risk increases, and other research indicates that the risk of developing AF can increase by as much as 8% for each extra daily drink.

A study recently completed at the Korea University College of Medicine demonstrated that people with no previous history of AF who drank a small amount of alcohol daily had a substantial increase in their risk of developing new-onset AF. The study went on to note that the researchers observed a 2% increase in new-onset AF risk with every additional weekly gram consumed.

How Does Alcohol Affect AF?

The Journal of The American College of Cardiology published research in 2016, showing that alcohol can trigger AF and produces progressive adverse changes in the structure of the heart’s upper chambers, called the atria. These changes happen in people who are long-term regular consumers. Short-term sustained alcohol use can cause changes in the heart’s electrical conduction system that alter regular heart rate and rhythm. The study goes on to link heavy binge drinking with sudden cardiac death in people with other types of heart disease. Light to moderate consumption can also result in an increased risk for AF. Other conditions connected with AF, such as obstructive sleep apnea, hypertension, obesity and cardiomyopathy can result from or worsen with alcohol consumption. Alcohol consumption can also cause disruptive sleep patterns, which is a risk factor for AF.

How Much Alcohol Can Someone with AF Safely Consume?

Although some medical professionals consider a small amount of alcohol use to be heart-healthy, these benefits unfortunately don't apply to AF.

The American Heart Association reported in 2017 that there was convincing evidence that excessive alcohol intake, defined by physicians as more than three drinks per day, increases AF risk. Light to moderate consumption, defined as less than two drinks per day for men and less than one drink per day for women, with no episodes of binge drinking, demonstrated no increased risk.

One study conducted by UC San Francisco in 2017 showed that for every decade that people abstain from alcohol, there was a roughly 20% lower rate of AF occurrence. The report went on to say that a review of 14 other similar research papers indicated there was a relationship between any amount of alcohol consumption and increased AF risk.

Research provided in the January 2020 issue of the New England Journal of Medicine demonstrated that regular drinkers who abstained from alcohol showed a reduction in the recurrence of their AF.

Alcohol use can also cause problems with the atrial fibrillation medications you take to control your AF. If blood thinners are a part of your AFib treatment regimen, drinking alcohol can increase the risk of bleeding.

Should People with AF Abstain from Alcohol Use?

If you have AF, the main concern is whether alcohol will trigger an episode. Each person's physiological differences will determine how well they can tolerate alcohol consumption and how much they must consume to trigger an event.

According to Dr. Davendra Mehta, Ph.D., a professor of cardiology at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai St. Luke's Hospital in New York City, a single drink may be enough to push some people into AF.

In general, regarding AFib and alcohol use, it's wise to consider the following guidelines when deciding whether to have a drink:

- If alcohol has triggered an AF episode in the past, it's a good idea to abstain.
- It's never safe to binge drink.
- Light to moderate consumption for men is less than two drinks per day, and for women it's less than one drink per day; heavy use is three or more drinks per day.
- Any type of alcohol can trigger an AF episode, regardless if it's beer, wine or hard liquor.

The best decision you can make about your AFib and alcohol consumption is to discuss it with your physician first. Your physician understands your medical history and current medication regimen and will give you solid advice based on the latest research.