COVID Vaccine Safety for People With Atrial Fibrillation

by JEFFREY REDEKOPP

AFib and COVID Vaccine

Atrial fibrillation (AF) is currently the most common heart rhythm disturbance worldwide. Millions of people with AF experience fatigue, shortness of breath, dizziness, and heart palpitations because of the condition. Many people have concerns about whether having AF puts them at higher risk of contracting a cold or influenza virus and experiencing more severe symptoms or a longer duration of the virus.

With the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic last year, countless individuals with AF are very anxious about their risk level for contracting the disease. So, here's what to know about AFib and the COVID vaccine.

Risk Level of Contracting COVID-19 for People With AF

The Center for Disease Control (CDC) states people with heart conditions, like cardiomyopathy, coronary artery disease, and heart failure have a much higher risk of becoming severely ill from COVID-19. However, the CDC does not group AF into this category.

The American College of Cardiology says having a pre-existing arrhythmia like AF does not increase the risk of COVID-19 infection but appears to elevate the risk of death from COVID-19, depending on the severity of the arrhythmia.

With these guidelines in mind, more and more people with AF question whether they should get vaccinated and how it will affect their AF.

Should People With AF Get the COVID Vaccine?

The CDC considers AF an underlying heart condition, so if you choose to receive the vaccine, you receive priority on the recipient list.

The American Heart Association released a statement in January of this year encouraging people with any heart disease, history of stroke or heart attack, and those individuals with risk factors for but no underlying heart disease to get vaccinated as soon as possible.

According to Dr. Nisha Parikh, an associate professor of medicine at the University of California at San Francisco and a clinical cardiologist, the primary issue with contracting COVID-19 is that it can cause respiratory distress that will worsen conditions like AF.

She states that some research discovered heart scarring in people with COVID-19 and that increased blood clotting is a serious potential issue. Both problems could elevate the risk of developing congestive heart failure or stroke for those with AF.

In one study referenced by WebMD said people hospitalized with COVID-19 from March to June 2020 who had an AF episode during that stay had a much higher likelihood of developing kidney or further heart problems. These people also had two and a half times higher risk of death or moved into hospice care.

The same study also demonstrated that 20% of people hospitalized with COVID-19 had AF episodes, regardless of whether they had any prior history of the disease.

Are the Current Vaccines Safe for People With AF?

According to an April 2021 question and answer forum on the European Society of Cardiology website, the COVID-19 vaccine trials showed no severe side effects for people with any heart condition.

The forum also shared no evidence of adverse drug interactions between any of the current available COVID-19 vaccines and other heart medications. The same is true with contraindications, as the information provided states there is no evidence supporting the idea that people with any heart condition are more vulnerable.

Although the vaccines have side effects such as a sore arm, mild fatigue, mild body aches, and a mild fever, those vaccines with FDA approval demonstrate no unusual issues for AF patients. People with AF are also not at a higher risk of experiencing an allergic reaction.

People who choose not to get vaccinated can place themselves at greater risk from the virus compared to people receiving the vaccine.

My Experience With AF and the COVID Vaccine

Because I am a man over the age of 50 with a history of paroxysmal AF in one other underlying chronic health condition, I chose to get vaccinated. I received the Pfizer brand vaccine and had my second dose on St. Patrick's Day.

My post-vaccination symptoms included a sore arm for about half a day, very mild fatigue and body aches, and a slight fever. These feelings disappeared by the next day after sleeping over eight hours the night before.

I too had concerns about side effects but have felt none since the day of my second injection. Although I continue to wear a mask and practice social distancing guidelines in public, I have felt a great sense of relief since my second shot, knowing that I have better protection in place.

In Conclusion

If you suffer from AF and have concerns about the safety of receiving the vaccine, schedule an appointment or phone call with your cardiologist to talk through your questions. There is a great deal of misinformation spreading through some forms of media, and your cardiologist will have the most up-to-date data and will be able to give you the best advice.

Understanding the facts about the vaccine will help you make a wise decision. As with any other type of vaccination, people with deeply held cultural or religious beliefs or different personal values may decide against receiving the vaccine.

Each of us has the freedom to decide, and it is vital to have accurate information and wise counsel from your physician before making your choice.