How Exercise Affects Atrial Fibrillation

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Can AFib Go Away With Exercise?

Atrial fibrillation (AF) is a heart arrhythmia experienced by many people across the globe. AF symptoms often include an irregular heart rate, shortness of breath, dizziness, fatigue, and a sensation of pounding in the chest.

AF episodes can happen in bursts that last for a few seconds or, for some people, can be permanent. AF treatment often includes medication, electrical cardioversion, or a selected surgical procedure, depending on the individual. But can AFib go away with exercise?

If you have AF, it is essential to make lifestyle modifications to improve heart health to help you manage your condition and treat or prevent other diseases, like high blood pressure and coronary artery disease. Your healthcare team will make recommendations based on your medical history and current health, including starting and maintaining a regular exercise program.

Exercise and Atrial Fibrillation

Many people with AF are wary of exercise, knowing that it will elevate their heart rate. However, it can seem counterintuitive for an elevated heart rate to be beneficial, knowing that one of the primary treatment goals for AF is to keep the heart rate under control.

So, the questions most people with AF have about exercise are:

- Is it safe for me?
- How much should I be doing?
- What kind of exercise is the best?
- Will exercise reduce or end my AF symptoms?

Exercising With Atrial Fibrillation

If you have AF, research shows that it is safe for you to exercise within reason.

According to the American Heart Association, regular exercise will help improve heart structure and function. It’s also known that regular exercise can reduce symptoms, improve the ability to perform activities of daily living, and increase your quality of life.

A recent study published in the journal Circulation demonstrated that out of 51 participants with AF, 38% of the exercise group experienced reduced AF symptoms. However, these individuals were not engaging in vigorous exercise like extreme high volume endurance training, which can elevate the risk of AF.

Studies also demonstrate that people with AF who are fit have fewer episodes than those with low fitness levels.

It’s unlikely that exercise will worsen AF if you follow some precautions such as:

- Exercise when you are not experiencing an episode.
- Exercise if your heart rate is well-controlled.
- Don’t exercise if you are experiencing any symptoms unless you have received specific clearance from your cardiologist to do so.
- Avoid exercise if you are experiencing more than mild fatigue, as this can trigger an AF episode.
- Decrease the intensity of your workout if you are taking certain medications. If you take medications, like beta-blockers, you may have less energy. However, it is still beneficial to exercise; decrease the duration and intensity of what you usually do.

Exercise Duration and Intensity for People With Atrial Fibrillation

Everyone with AF needs to have a conversation with their cardiologist before starting or continuing with their current exercise program. Your cardiologist will give you clear guidance and may refer you to a cardiac rehabilitation program for specific instruction.

If you are not someone who engages in regular exercise, it is wise to start slow, with 5 to 10 minutes of aerobic activity, such as walking around the block or on a treadmill at a moderate pace. Walking is a good way to get moving and elevate your heart rate safely without strain.

It’s recommended to set a target goal of 150 minutes a week of moderate exercise. Then, gradually increase your exercise duration weekly as you become more conditioned and feel like you can handle it.
You can also progressively increase your speed to walk briskly if you remain free of symptoms. If you want to increase your duration, moving up to 60 minutes per session is generally optimal.

Types of Exercise for People With Atrial Fibrillation

Before we answer "Can AFib go away with exercise?" it is good to know about the best types of exercise for AF patients. If you are looking for other forms of aerobic exercise besides walking that are safe for people with AF, consider the following:

- Swimming
- Bicycling
- Using a rowing machine or cross-country ski machine
- Using an elliptical or stairclimbing machine
- Hiking
- Slow jogging

Aerobic exercise is beneficial for people with AF because it raises the heart rate and keeps it elevated, which will help the heart muscle become better conditioned so that it does not have to work as hard during regular daily activities.

Resistance training and stretching are also an essential part of a well-balanced exercise plan because both forms of exercise will help improve muscle strength and flexibility.

Incorporate resistance training two to three days per week per body part. Add in stretching exercises at the beginning or end of your exercise session once your muscles are warm.

If you have no experience with resistance training and do not know how to start, consider scheduling a consultation with an exercise physiologist or a certified personal trainer with expertise in exercise prescription for people with heart conditions. Either of these individuals can also show you appropriate stretches to improve your flexibility.

If exercise has been a regular part of your routine and you are looking to resume, increase your intensity or

duration, or try an exercise class or a different training variation. Make sure to consult with one of the two exercise professionals mentioned above.

How Does Exercise Affect Atrial Fibrillation Symptoms?

An article in the December 2015 issue of Canadian Family Physician shared that AF is probably less common as physical activity levels increase. However, the risk of AF increases with higher levels of exercise.

A study published in the November 2020 edition of the American Journal of Physiology supports exercise training as an effective tactic for reducing the risk of AF episodes.

So, can AFib go away with exercise? Research has demonstrated that exercise can help people better manage AF and reduce symptoms, but the evidence is lacking to show that exercise can eliminate symptoms.

If you have AF, finding the right type, duration, and intensity of exercise may take some time because of your form of AF and individual genetic differences.

Working with your cardiologist and a certified exercise professional with experience in exercise prescription for individuals with AF will help you develop and implement a safe and effective program.