How What You're Eating Can Affect AFib Symptoms

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Healthy Eating With AFib

If you suffer from atrial fibrillation (AFib), it is likely you've received a lot of information from well-meaning doctors and nurses about a healthy diet and healthy habits for AFib. This is most likely in regards to warfarin (Coumadin) and vitamin K — but it may not actually be necessary to reduce vitamin K in the diet.

Have you heard about the benefits of the Mediterranean diet and AFib? Research is proving that following this diet may decrease the risk of AFib. Read on to learn more about vitamin K and keeping a healthy diet with AFib.

The Link Between Vitamin K and Warfarin

As you already know, warfarin is a blood thinner that prevents blood clots. Vitamin K does the opposite — it helps blood clot. Too much vitamin K in the diet may inhibit the action of warfarin or reverse the effect of the warfarin you are taking.

Warfarin dosing is adjusted by drawing frequent INR levels. A therapeutic INR level for you is 2.0 – 3.0. Consuming an excess amount of vitamin K in the diet can alter your INR level rapidly.

At one point in time it was believed you should limit eating foods high in vitamin K; this was believed to make it easier to measure warfarin dosages because the INR would remain relatively stable.

It is now believed that restricting entire food groups from your diet may backfire, because we all know we want to eat what we are told we cannot have.

Foods That Contain Vitamin K

Vitamin K is abundant in vegetables, especially dark, leafy greens. It can also be found in certain fruits, soy products, and other food items. Here is a brief list of foods that are high in vitamin K (with vitamin K content in micrograms):

- Kale, frozen, 1 cup: 1147
- Collard greens, frozen, 1 cup: 1059
- Spinach, frozen, 1 cup: 1027
- Turnip greens, frozen, 1 cup: 851
- Mustard greens, cooked, 1 cup: 830
- Brussels sprouts, frozen, 1 cup: 300
- Broccoli, cooked, 1 cup: 200
- Enriched noodles, 1 cup: 162
- Cole slaw, 1 cup: 135
- Miso, 1 cup: 81

- Plums, dried, 1 cup: 65
- Canned tuna in oil, 1 cup: 64
- Pie crust, 1 crust: 59
- Bread crumbs, 1 cup: 55
- Romaine lettuce, raw, 1 cup: 48

“The Old Way” Versus “The New Way”

In the past you were probably advised to avoid dark leafy vegetables. This basically eliminates salads, green smoothies and other vegetable side dishes — this can make dining out inconvenient and can also cause you to miss out on a lot of other great nutrients.

However, according to the Heart & Vascular Team at Cleveland Clinic, consistency is key. This means eating a consistent amount of vitamin K each day.

- If you enjoy eating foods high in vitamin K, you may need to have a higher dose of warfarin.
- Be consistent with your vitamin K intake daily — fluctuations can cause your INR to go too high or too low.
- Do not eliminate an entire group of foods, especially if you enjoy it!

Mediterranean Diet for Atrial Fibrillation

Consuming a heart healthy diet is also essential. In fact, Spain’s University of Navarra and the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria have determined that following a Mediterranean diet reduces the risk of developing AFib.

Next page: more about the Mediterranean diet and what it can do for you.

Mediterranean Diet for Atrial Fibrillation

This doesn’t mean that since you already have AFib you wouldn’t benefit from following the Mediterranean diet. Below we’ve outlined the principles of the Mediterranean diet that can be applied to your own diet to bolster heart health.

“Good” Fats

You don’t need to be afraid of all dietary fat! Consuming “good” fat (also known as monounsaturated fat) is a staple in the Mediterranean diet.

Good fat does not cause weight gain — excess calories do! It also does not cause blockages in the heart. Monounsaturated fats include:

- Extra-virgin olive oil
- Avocado
- Nuts and seeds
- Olives

Red Wine

A glass or two of red wine is actually recommended as part of the Mediterranean diet! For women, one glass is recommended. For men, one to two glasses are recommended.

Grains and Legumes

Choose whole grain options of breads, pastas and rice when available. Add legumes to meals — use them in

soups, as side dishes, drizzled with olive oil, or consumed with a little bit of cheese!

Fruit

Have fruit as a dessert or snack, rather than pastries, cakes and ice cream. Pair it with plain Greek yogurt for added health benefit.

Vegetables

Try a variety of different vegetables! Drizzle them with olive oil, experiment with different cooking techniques such as grilling or stir-frying, use them liberally in salads and soups or eat them fresh.

Fish and Meat

Try to eat fish a couple of times per week. Fish is high in omega-3 fatty acids, which are not only good for heart health, but also brain health.

If consuming other types of meat, select lean cuts and use them as an addition to the meal rather than the main item. An example would be topping a salad with two ounces of steak instead of having an eight-ounce steak as the main dish.

Dairy

Try plain Greek yogurt instead of sweetened yogurts. Drizzle with honey or add your own fruit. Limit cheeses but experiment with different types.

A Word About Hydration…

Optimal hydration is also important. Consuming too much alcohol or caffeine and too little water can alter the fluid levels in your body, which can cause the heart to not operate effectively.

It is a good idea to consume an adequate amount of water throughout the day, especially on days when the temperature is hot or where you will be exercising.