How You Can Reduce Your Risk of Stroke With AFib

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AFib and Stroke — Decreasing Your Risk

Atrial fibrillation (AFib) increases your risk of a stroke incrementally — your risk is five times greater than that of a person without AFib. However, there are ways to decrease your risk of a stroke, and understanding why you are at a higher risk is the first step.

What is AFib?

According to the American Heart Association, it is estimated that 2.7 million Americans are living with AFib and most don't believe it is a serious condition! Perhaps that is because they don't understand their own heart condition.

When a heart is beating in a sinus rhythm — a normal rhythm — the atria and ventricles contract at a regular beat in order to push the blood through the heart. Their job is to push the blood through the heart and into the lungs for oxygenation, where it is then circulated throughout the body.

When a heart is in atrial fibrillation, the atria (the upper chambers of the heart) are fibrillating, or quivering. This quivering does not push all of the blood into circulation, and some of the blood stays in the atria, where it may form a blood clot.

What Causes a Stroke in People With AFib?

If a clot breaks off and is subsequently pushed into circulation, it will probably lodge into an artery. This impedes blood flow, which then causes a stroke. It is estimated that 15% to 20% of strokes happen to people with AFib.

What Are Stroke Risk Factors?

According to the National Stroke Association, risk factors can be broken down into several different categories: lifestyle risk factors, medical risk factors and uncontrollable risk factors.

Uncontrollable Risk Factors:

- **Age.** Stroke risk doubles after the age of 55.
- **Previous strokes.** 800,000 strokes occur annually, and one-quarter of those are recurrent events.
- **Family history.** If you have a family history of a stroke at an early age, your risk of a stroke increases.
- **Gender.** Women have more strokes than men due to the fact that they live longer.
- **Race.** African Americans have the highest incidence of strokes, followed by Hispanic and Asian/Pacific Islanders.
- **Certain conditions.** For example, having a patent foramen ovale (PFO), a history of transient ischemic

attacks (TIAs) and having fibromuscular dysplasia (FMD).

Medical Risk Factors:

- **Hypertension.** This is the number one cause of strokes. People with elevated blood pressure have one and a half times greater risk of a stroke than those without high blood pressure.
- **Carotid artery disease (CAD).** This is often a silent disease and often occurs due to an unhealthy lifestyle and not managing other risks, such as high cholesterol.
- **Diabetes.** People with diabetes (both type 1 and type 2 diabetes) are up to four times more likely to have a stroke than people without diabetes.

Lifestyle Risk Factors:

- **Smoking.** Smoking can double the risk of a stroke because it can thicken the blood, which can cause a blood clot.
- **Physical activity.** People who are physically active can reduce their stroke risk.
- **Diet.** Too many calories can cause excess weight, high cholesterol, hypertension and diabetes, all of which increases the risk of a stroke.

How Can You Reduce Your Risk of a Stroke?

Reading through the stroke risk factors, it is clear that there is nothing that can be done for uncontrollable risk factors: you cannot turn back the hands of time and your genetic makeup determines your gender and your race.

However, you do have control over your lifestyle, which can decrease your chances of developing the medical risk factors.

Quitting smoking may be one of the best things you can do for yourself. Although this may seem daunting, there are a variety of resources. Seek help from your doctor if you feel you need a prescription medication.

Get exercising. Exercise doesn’t have to be difficult. While you may envision yourself at the gym lifting weights, exercise can be as simple as a walk in the park with your significant other or dancing in your living room.

It just needs to be something to get your heart rate elevated. Find something that you enjoy and stick with it!

Lose weight if you need to. To lose weight, you need to take in fewer calories than you burn. Seek help from your doctor or ask for a referral to speak with a registered dietitian (RD), who can evaluate your specific needs.

In addition, if you have AFib and are prescribed a blood thinner to prevent blood from pooling in your atria, take it exactly as prescribed by your doctor. This includes getting lab work when ordered.