Why AFib Develops Early and What Can be Done

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Causes, Symptoms, and Appropriate Treatments When AFib Develops Early in Life

Many heart problems are an unfortunate consequence of aging: as the heart muscle weakens over time, disease can develop, and hazardous consequences tend to follow. However, certain conditions don't discriminate, including electrical disruptions like atrial fibrillation (AFib).

While your chances of developing AFib rise dramatically past middle age, people in their 20s, 30s and 40s are not immune. In fact, more young people than ever before are contracting AFib — including teenagers.

Although this spike in cases could be tied to a better understanding and diagnosis of AFib in people of all ages, there are also important health factors that shouldn't be overlooked.

Common Causes of AFib in Young Adults

Coronary artery disease, high blood pressure and heart attacks are among the most common causes of AFib, but don't often come to mind when young, seemingly healthy people develop AFib. While there certainly are cases of underlying heart disease bringing on AFib in younger people, in many other cases congenital defects, environmental factors and illnesses are to blame.

Alcohol, Caffeine or Illicit Drug Use

Substances that stimulate the heart too much can trigger an atrial flutter or fibrillation, and the more frequently these are used, the more likely more AFib episodes will follow. Heavy drinking (more than a drink a day) certainly puts you at a greater risk, but binge drinking increases your chances of experiencing AFib the most.

Each person reacts differently to stimulants, so while some people could drink coffee throughout the day without a problem, others might feel symptoms after one small cup. Know your atrial fibrillation triggers, and be prepared to abstain completely if that's what you need to keep your heart healthy.

Stress

Psychological stress, especially when it brings on anxiety, is unarguably tied to AFib. The majority of patients report that stress is a major trigger for their AFib episodes, whether it comes from a job, a major life change, or a relationship dynamic.

Physical stress can also cause irregular electrical signals to bounce around the heart, especially when you're pushing your body to its limits. For instance, endurance athletes in training are more prone to AFib, despite having a high level of fitness.

When physical stress is to blame, scaling back exertion often helps a lot, but you might still need medication to

return your heart rhythm to normal.

Mineral Imbalance

Your body depends on many minerals to function well and stay balanced. When it comes to your heart, magnesium, calcium and potassium (in the right proportions) are especially important for proper functioning.

The average modern diet — full of processed foods and laced with plenty of empty calories — can exclude important food sources that deliver crucial minerals. Too much alcohol or sweetened carbonated drinks can also leach minerals from your body, which will impact your bones and muscles even more.

If your diet is less than ideal, consult your doctor about testing your mineral levels to see if they might be impacting your heart.

Infections

Infections around the heart membrane (pericarditis) can set the stage for AFib, as can certain bacterial infections (notably, the H. pylori organism that causes stomach ulcers). Studies have found that C-reactive protein — an important marker of systemic inflammation that comes with infections — is present in AFib patients.

Obstructive Sleep Apnea

Recent research has confirmed that sleep apnea is a top risk factor for AFib, perhaps even more important than cardiovascular disease. Obstructive sleep apnea is also closely tied to obesity, which might help explain why AFib rates are climbing as obesity rates are rising around the world.

It’s very possible to live with sleep apnea without even realizing it. Luckily, you can easily be tested for the disorder, and if it is detected, continuous positive airway therapy (CPAP) can bring both the sleep apnea and the AFib under control quickly and effectively.

When No Medical Cause Can Be Found

Advances in genetic research and a better understanding of heart conditions has helped doctors explain more early-onset AFib cases, but there are times when AFib cannot be traced to any concrete health problem. Young patients who have no identifiable risk factors or medical conditions are said to have “lone AFib” – a seemingly normal heart that behaves abnormally. Sleep apnea, extreme exercise, and alcohol abuse are causes that would fit into the lone AFib category.

Lone AFib develops in people under 60, and very little is known about why it happens and how it will behave in the future. In many cases, a short course of medication can eliminate the AFib symptoms, but for some, heart palpitations and other symptoms will come back, sometimes becoming permanent.

If you’re under 60 and are experiencing any common AFib symptoms like palpitations, shortness of breath, weakness, a rapid or irregular heartbeat, or AFib dizzy spells, the most important thing you can do is see your doctor right away. AFib tends to get more severe as time goes on, so even if you don’t have heart disease or another concerning cardiovascular problem, it’s important to get treatment underway.