Avoiding Complications of Atrial Fibrillation

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Common Complications of Atrial Fibrillation and How to Prevent Them

Uncontrolled atrial fibrillation has the potential to lead to serious illnesses including stroke, blood clots, and damage to the heart. While medication can help keep your AFib under control and therefore reduce your risk of complications, some medications can actually cause complications of their own. Let's take a look at some of the more common complications of atrial fibrillation and how to prevent them.

Avoiding Blood Clots

The most common and potentially serious complication of atrial fibrillation is blood clot formation. When your heart is not pumping the blood throughout your heart and the rest of the body effectively, clots can form. Blood clots may then lodge in tissues throughout the body.

If a clot lodges in your heart, you would have a myocardial infarction, commonly known as a heart attack. Blood clots in the lungs are known as pulmonary emboli. Strokes are often caused by blood clots in the brain. Clots may lodge in other parts of the body as well, however the three mentioned are the most serious – each of these conditions is potentially fatal.

In order to prevent blood clots, health care providers take measures to restore your heart beat to normal. Medications are given which slow down and strengthen the heartbeat. Anticoagulant medications, blood thinners, are employed to inhibit clot formation. Generally, medications are administered for the rest of a person's life.

Safe Use of Anticoagulant Medications

There is a delicate balance between the blood's ability to prevent unwanted clots and ability to form clots so that excessive bleeding does not occur. Blood tests are used to ensure that the balance is safely maintained.

The most commonly prescribed anticoagulant is the drug warfarin. Other newer anticoagulants are sometimes used instead. If you take warfarin you will need to get frequent blood tests. Your medication dose will be adjusted based upon the results of those tests.

The newer drugs do not require as much monitoring. However, if excessive bleeding occurs and you are taking warfarin, an antidote is readily available – this is not the case with the newer drugs. Discuss the pros and cons of your treatment options with your health care provider to see which therapy is best for you.

Here are some tips to prevent bleeding:

- Use care if you are performing activities which may cause bleeding. For example; use an electric razor to shave instead of a manual one.
- Report excess bruising and bleeding to your health care provider promptly.

- If you wish to become pregnant; consult with your health care provider as anticoagulant medications are usually not be taken during pregnancy.
- Do not take over the counter or herbal remedies and supplements without discussing their use with your health care provider. Avoid aspirin, supplemental Vitamin E, and other NSAID products.
- Limit your intake of foods that contain large amounts of vitamin K such as dark green leafy vegetables, as vitamin K interferes with clot prevention actions of the medication. Moderate intake of foods rich in vitamin K is safe.
- Report the occurrence of dark or tarry stools to your health care provider.
- Take your medication as ordered. Follow your prescribed schedule for blood testing precisely.

Next page: reducing AFib epidodes and adopting a heart healthy lifestyle.

Reducing AFib Episodes

Atrial fibrillation may be partially or completely controlled with the use of medication, but there are also some actions which you can take to prevent recurrent episodes.

- Take medications as ordered.
- Keep recommended appointments for tests, such as EKGs and blood work.
- Manage stress.
- Limit your intake of caffeine.

Adopt a Heart Healthy Lifestyle

Living a lifestyle that is healthy for your heart is key to preventing complications like cardiac damage and stroke. A heart healthy lifestyle offers benefits for your entire body – you will feel better while you are decreasing your risk of serious complications of atrial fibrillation. A heart healthy lifestyle includes the following:

- If you smoke or use tobacco, stop. If you cannot stop completely, cut down. Take advantage of the many smoking cessation supports available today. If you are considering using medication to stop smoking, consult with your health care provider for his or her advice.
- Eat a diet that is primarily plant based. If you eat meat, choose meat from animals that are raised organically or grass fed. Meat from wild animals is healthy too. A portion of meat should be no larger than a deck of playing cards. Consume at least thirty five grams of fiber each day. Avoid saturated fats. Consult with a dietitian for specific advice.
- Maintain a healthy weight.

- Limit alcohol consumption. Check with your health care provider to see if alcohol is contraindicated with your medications.
- Get daily exercise. Check with your health care provider before beginning an exercise program.
- Monitor your blood pressure as recommended by your health care provider.
- Evaluate what causes stress and your response to it. Take appropriate actions to prevent and limit stress.
- Pay attention to your social and spiritual needs.

You have the ability to reduce the likelihood of minor and serious complications associated with AFib. In time, you may discover that an AFib diagnosis starts you on a new and healthier lifestyle path, which allows you to feel better and enjoy life more.