What to Do When You Experience Chest Pain With AFib

by ANGELA FINLAY

What AFib Chest Pain Can Mean and How to Handle It

Most people understand that chest pain can point to major problems, but when you live with atrial fibrillation (AFib), you may chalk up your discomfort to regular palpitation pain. In fact, only 33% of Americans with AFib think their condition is serious, and perhaps because it is relatively easy to control with the right medication and surgery.

Complacency can lead to complications. Although regular AFib discomfort and more serious chest pain can be difficult to tell apart, it is important to learn about the causes and symptoms so you can act quickly and appropriately in case of an emergency.

Common Chest Symptoms With AFib

Many people with atrial fibrillation don't have any symptoms at all, and others get frequent, mild discomforts. Generally, most symptoms can be controlled with medication, but sometimes worrying symptoms can hit out of the blue. When it comes to chest discomfort, the most common complaints are:

- Palpitations.
- Racing heartbeat.
- Mild pressure or general discomfort.

In many cases, chest pain is the consequence of typical AFib sensations that are not life-threatening. Heart palpitations and a racing heartbeat that goes on for too long can result in some chest pain (known as angina) due to the reduced blood flow to the heart. Angina isn't a heart attack, but it can be difficult to distinguish between angina and other chest pain.

Patients with paroxysmal atrial fibrillation (AFib symptoms that come and go) tend to notice more unpleasant or painful chest symptoms more frequently, such as severe dizziness, palpitations, blackouts and chest pains. It can be more pronounced simply because you are not used to feeling them, or else they may indicate a more serious event. In either case, a sudden AFib attack should be promptly addressed with a call or visit to your doctor.

Is it Anxiety or an AFib Emergency?

Since AFib involves the heart, it is natural to suspect a heart attack when chest pain or palpitations occur, but sometimes the sensation in your chest is the consequence of another, unrelated event. Anxiety attacks can bring on symptoms similar to AFib, but an episode can trigger an anxiety attack with AFib.

Both panic attacks and AFib episodes can hit suddenly and without provocation. The difference is panic attacks are emotional responses to physiological triggers, while AFib rests entirely on irregularities in your heartbeat. If you are feeling an emotional component — a sense of dread, extreme worry, or fear that you may be going crazy —

chances are it is a panic attack that is sending your heart racing. In order to pinpoint the discomfort and calm your mind, keep a couple of facts in mind:

AFib Doesn't Increase Your Risk of Heart Attack

Although AFib can lead to complications, it won't cause a heart attack. In atrial fibrillation, the electrical signals of the heart's two upper chambers and two lower chambers are out of sync, which results in a rapid, irregular heartbeat. This event is in no way related to a heart attack, where plaque builds up in the coronary artery, ruptures and forms a clot that blocks blood flow to the heart muscle.

Although AFib doesn't raise the risk of heart attack, it does increase your risk of heart failure. When AFib is not properly controlled, the rapid heart rate can eventually weaken the heart muscle. When the heart is too weak to pump blood through the body well enough to feed all your tissues, you are in serious danger. Be sure to discuss with your doctor how best to decrease your risk of heart failure.

A Panic Attack Has Less Serious Health Complications

A panic attack isn't pleasant, but it is also not physically damaging, and it will pass. The feelings of doom and discomfort are difficult to dismiss, but they will gradually fade, along with the racing heartbeat, light-headedness, sweating and ache in the chest.

On the other hand, AFib episodes typically end as suddenly as they begin, so if your chest pain comes on and leaves abruptly, cardiovascular function is probably involved.

When Do You Go to the ER for AFib Chest Pain?

While AFib does not directly cause heart attacks, heart attacks can lead to AFib. This means that a heart attack can be overlooked or misdiagnosed as AFib when there is a deeper issue at play. In turn, you may be in danger of another heart attack without realizing it.

Some AFib symptoms are uncomfortable, but generally they are nothing to be too concerned about. However, there are times when your chest pain, pressure, or discomfort might signal a heart attack or heart failure:

- **Chest pain that lasts longer than usual.** If you feel pain in the center of your chest that lasts more than a few minutes, it can be cause for concern. Also, beware of pain that goes away but comes back over a longer stretch of time.
- **Squeezing pressure.** Extreme pressure – or the sensation that something is pressing or squeezing your chest to the point of discomfort – can signal a heart attack.
- **Radiating pain.** If your chest pain leads to pain in one or both arms, your jaw, neck or upper back, seek emergency attention. Heart attack pain isn't always concentrated in the middle of the chest, but rather felt in a variety of places (especially for women).

Even if you have never had any AFib complications, it is important to be prepared for an emergency. If your AFib chest pain demands a trip to the emergency room, expect to relay your heart health history in detail to the doctors on duty.

Keep a list of all your medications handy, be sure to discuss any allergies and previous hospitalizations and get to know your family health history (especially when it comes to heart health, bleeding or clotting issues)

Time is of the essence when a heart condition is involved, so the better you keep track of your health, the easier it is to begin treatment and better your chances are of avoiding serious, permanent damage.