Is It an AFib Attack or a Heart Attack?

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What's the Difference between a Heart Attack and AFib?

Many people get the conditions of atrial fibrillation (AFib) and a heart attacks confused. It is not hard to do – both involve the heart, and they can feel very similar, given the right conditions. However, they are distinct and separate conditions that are treated in different ways. And, if you have AFib, that doesn't mean you will have a heart attack, either.

What is a Heart Attack?

When someone has a heart attack, something happens with the blood flow to the heart itself. What results is tissue damage since the heart cells are not receiving nourishment, and are essentially dying. This is a medical emergency where the person needs to be taken to the hospital or paramedics called to the scene.

What is Atrial Fibrillation?

With AFib, the heart has an abnormal rhythm. It results in blood flow "backing up" into the atria of the heart. The heart's electrical system (yes, it has electrical components) that controls heart rhythm misfires, causing the heart to beat at an irregular, fast rate.

The risk of stroke is higher when a person has AFib because the blood has a chance to form clots when it pools in the heart chambers.

Symptoms of Heart Attack

When a person experiences a heart attack, they are likely to feel:

- Chest discomfort or pressure
- Chest pain
- Shortness of breath
- Confusion
- Extreme fatigue
- Dizziness
- Sweating
- Nausea
- Pain that travels down the arm(s)
- Pain that goes into the jaw, back, or stomach

The pain can be mild but it can also be severe. It may be intermittent.

If a person has a heart attack, the likelihood of another one is higher. Medications are prescribed to prevent

further heart attacks. An exercise program is prescribed as well to help the patient obtain a healthy weight. A diet that is low in fat, cholesterol, and other things that compromise heart health will be encouraged. High blood pressure will be assessed and treated and medication to lower cholesterol may be needed as well.

Symptoms of AFib

The symptoms of AFib may feel similar to those of a heart attack:

- Heart palpitations
- Chest discomfort or pressure
- Chest pain
- Lightheadedness
- Abdominal pain
- Shortness of breath
- Fatigue
- Lack of energy
- Exercise intolerance

The focus for treating AFib is to alleviate the symptoms and to prevent stroke or heart failure. Medication will be given to slow the heart rate and control the rhythm. Additionally, medications such as an anti-coagulant (or blood thinner) will be prescribed to help prevent stroke. You may be able to just take a baby aspirin if your risk of stroke is low.

Both AFib episodes and heart attacks can be scary for anyone who experiences them. Heart attacks require immediate attention, whereas AFib needs to be addressed by making a doctor’s appointment as soon as possible. Both can be treated successfully with prescribed medications and proper diet and exercise.