

Atrial Fibrillation: When The Heart Skips A Beat

(NAPSA)—Every heart has a built-in pacemaker that ensures it beats regularly. When that natural pacemaker doesn't do its job, however, a person may experience an irregular heart rhythm, the most common and undertreated of which is atrial fibrillation (AF). This irregular heartbeat isn't always noticeable at first but can cause chaos over time.

Understanding AF

AF, which affects more than 33.5 million people worldwide, occurs when the upper chambers of the heart beat significantly faster than a normal heartbeat or quiver irregularly. Some people with AF have no symptoms, while others have chest discomfort or pain and experience fainting or light-headedness, as well as fatigue, shortness of breath or weakness.

"When I was young, my heart did funny things. It fluttered, it skipped a beat, but mostly it resolved by itself," said Sue Halpern, a lifelong AF patient. "When it didn't resolve by itself, I somehow learned how to make it stop. I began to notice in my 20s and early 30s that it was getting harder to make it stop, but I still didn't know anything was wrong with me."

Because the heart isn't pumping normally, blood can pool in the heart and clot; these clots can also make their way through the bloodstream. If left untreated, people with AF have a much higher risk of stroke and an increased risk of heart failure.

AF is typically caused by damage to the heart from disease, an abnormality from birth, surgery or a heart attack. However, adopting healthy behaviors such as monitoring cholesterol and blood pressure, avoiding smoking and excessive caffeine, and not abusing alcohol can help prevent disease.

How To Tell If You Have AF

As with so many diseases, early detection of AF is important. Physicians may obtain an electrocardiogram (ECG) or stress test, or recommend short-term monitoring with a cardiac event recorder or Holter monitor. Unlike these short-term methods, a small insertable cardiac monitor (ICM) automatically detects and records abnormal heart rhythms for up to three years, while remaining barely detectable under the patient's skin. For example, the Medtronic Reveal LINQ ICM is approximately one-third the size



Atrial fibrillation, an irregular heartbeat, can cause chaos over time—but there are ways to treat it—just as Sue Halpern did.

of an AAA battery, yet it can accurately detect AF.

What To Do If You Have AF

Once diagnosed, living with AF doesn't have to be a burden. While treatment options vary, many people respond well to medications. For those whose natural pacemaker needs an extra boost to keep the beat, treatment may include an implantable cardiac defibrillator (ICD) or a pacemaker that can respond to and reduce the duration of AF episodes. An ICD can also detect a dangerous and potentially life-threatening heart rhythm and send a lifesaving therapy to correct it.

Another treatment for paroxysmal (fleeting) atrial fibrillation (PAF) is cryoablation, a minimally invasive procedure that isolates the pulmonary veins, which are a source of erratic electrical signals that cause PAF. The device used in the procedure uses cold energy to interrupt these irregular electrical pathways in the heart.

In Halpern's case, cryoablation greatly reduced her PAF episodes and has given her a new outlook on life.

"For someone who was having episodes every seven to 10 days for eight to 12 hours at a time, I wouldn't have dreamed of having a life free of AF," Halpern said. "My advice is, if you feel something off with your heart, do something about it."

Learn More

Those who are living with or who suspect they may have AF can get further facts about therapies that may help get their heart back in sync and find a physician by visiting www.medtronic.com/us-en/patients/conditions/atrial-fibrillation-afib.html.