

Health Awareness

Healthy Hearts: Keeping The Beat

(NAPSA)—Most people have briefly experienced the feeling of their heart racing or skipping a beat. For more than 4 million Americans, however, these “heart arrhythmias” may cause dizziness, light-headedness, fatigue and sometimes fainting. Most arrhythmias are harmless but some can be extremely dangerous.

The most common type of arrhythmia is atrial fibrillation (AF), which affects more than 2.2 million Americans. Doctors say it is vital that people visit a medical professional as soon as symptoms of AF occur. Here’s a closer look:

Understanding AF

AF is an abnormality of heart rhythm caused by erratic electrical signals in the heart. These signals cause the upper chambers of the heart (the atria) to contract inconsistently with the lower chambers (the ventricles). This produces an irregular heartbeat. People with the following AF symptoms should see a doctor:

- Palpitations
- Weakness
- Light-headedness
- Confusion
- Shortness of breath
- Chest pain.

AF: Who’s At Risk?

Some people with AF may have no symptoms and are unaware of their condition until their doctor discovers it. That’s why it’s important to know if you’re at risk for the disease. The most common risk factor for development of AF



Learning the symptoms of AF, a common heart condition, could help protect you from stroke.

is age; 3 to 5 percent of people over the age of 65 have the condition. Anyone with a history of heart disease—including valve problems, history of heart attack and heart surgery—is also at an increased risk for AF.

Chronic conditions including thyroid problems, high blood pressure, sleep apnea and other medical problems can elevate the risk as well. Also, the use of alcohol, especially in binge drinking, can cause an episode of AF.

Taking a Toll

AF is a life-threatening condition that can lead to different health problems, including other heart rhythm issues, chronic fatigue, and congestive heart failure. Additionally, AF patients are three to five times more likely to develop stroke. Also, if untreated,

AF can weaken and stretch out the heart muscle, making it even more difficult for the heart to function properly. This puts kidneys and other organs at an increased risk for blood clots.

Diagnosing and Treating AF

It is important for people with AF symptoms to act fast and see a doctor immediately. Doing so could help prevent AF from reoccurring later in life. AF can be diagnosed through various tests involving the monitoring of the electrical activity of the heart and these include, electrocardiogram (ECG), Holter monitor and event recorder. Additionally, blood tests and other procedures may be performed to assess other medical conditions that may cause AF.

Current treatments include various medications such as heart rate limiting or rate control drugs and anti-arrhythmic drugs, which reduce the length and number of times a patient experiences heart palpitations.

Other treatments include electrocardioversion (an electric shock that restores normal heart rhythm), radio frequency ablation (using radio frequency energy to eliminate the tissue that triggers abnormal electrical signals or to block abnormal electrical pathways, both of which cause AF), surgery and pacemakers (to regulate heart rhythm).

To learn more about AF, talk with your doctor.