



Health Alert

Understanding AFib (Atrial Fibrillation)

(NAPSA)—If you or someone you care about is among the estimated 46 million Americans age 65 or older—or hope to be someday—here's something you should know. Seniors are at the highest risk for developing an irregular heartbeat, called atrial fibrillation or AFib, that, left untreated, could increase their risk for stroke by five times and doubles the chance of heart-related death—but you can protect yourself.

The Condition

AFib is an increasingly common condition, affecting more than 2.7 million Americans. The chances of developing AFib increase with age, affecting about 9 percent of people over age 65. Other risk factors include uncontrolled high blood pressure, underlying heart disease, family history, obesity and sleep apnea.

Lifestyle factors that could increase your risk include excessive consumption of alcohol, smoking and prolonged athletic training.

AFib occurs when electrical signals in the upper chambers of the heart become chaotic, disrupting the regular rhythm of the heart and its ability to efficiently move blood through its chambers; that is, AFib causes the heart's upper chamber to quiver rather than to pump. When blood collects in the upper chambers or moves slowly, a clot can form and potentially cause a stroke if it is pumped out of the heart and travels to the brain.

While technology has made it easier for medical professionals to detect AFib, older patients may not experience or fail to recognize symptoms, which can include a fluttering heartbeat, heart palpitations, light-headedness or feeling winded even while at rest. Other, less common symptoms include chest pain or fainting.

"For many people, stroke is their first symptom of AFib," says Patrick T. Elli-



Older Americans are more susceptible to the dangers of atrial fibrillation but there are ways to reduce your risk.

nor, M.D., Ph.D., Director of the Cardiac Arrhythmia Service at Massachusetts General Hospital.

What To Do

The good news is that recognizing the symptoms of AFib and getting treatment can significantly reduce the risk of stroke.

"AFib is a leading cause of stroke but it is treatable. That's why it's so important to understand your risks and recognize any symptoms you may have," Dr. Ellinor said.

Treatment for AFib using blood thinners has also become easier, thanks to new medications that don't require repeated blood tests and are more effective at stroke prevention. For some people, a surgical procedure in which the disruptive heart tissue is destroyed, called a cardiac ablation, can also be effective in preventing future occurrences of AFib.

If you suspect you have AFib, meet with your doctor and continue with any treatment, even if you no longer experience symptoms, Dr. Ellinor said.

Learn More

For further facts about AFib, including risk factors, symptoms and treatment, visit the American Heart Association at www.heart.org/afibawareness.

The American Heart Association's AFib awareness campaign is made possible with funding from the Bristol-Myers Squibb/Pfizer Alliance.