

More Than a Flutter: How to Know if Your Irregular Heartbeat is Atrial Fibrillation

February is Healthy Heart Month! Newman Memorial is locally supporting this in several key ways. Though the picture is in black and white, our staff turned up to show off their red last Friday to raise awareness for women's heart disease on Go Red for Women® Day. We also ran a Facebook contest (viewable in our photos) in which people entered a drawing by leaving their best healthy heart advice! The prize was a one-month membership to Pulse Fitness along with a Fitness Assessment and 2 sessions with Certified Personal Trainer, Dakota Williams. Congratulations to our lucky winner, Kelsey Longhofer! In addition, we are offering CT Heart Scans at the reduced rate of \$40 if they are scheduled and completed during the month of February. This is a great community outreach to get people thinking about and being proactive about their heart health!

Another way we can support Healthy Heart Month is through community education. The goal of this article is to give a brief overview of atrial fibrillation (AFib), its symptoms and risk factors. When asked to describe how atrial fibrillation feels, often patients will say it's like their heart just flutters. This seemingly benign symptom could signal a much bigger issue. If you are experiencing heart symptoms – like a fluttering sensation – you should talk with your doctor. Just because it isn't painful, doesn't mean it's something to ignore.

These “flutterings” are heart palpitations and they can be a sign that something in your heart is not working properly. It is vital to find the cause of these symptoms and treat them promptly and properly to avoid more serious conditions or complications. While heart palpitations can indicate a number of heart conditions, one common condition is called atrial fibrillation.

Atrial fibrillation, also called AFib or AF, is a condition that causes a quivering or irregular heartbeat. It can lead to blood clots, stroke, heart failure and other heart-related complications. According to the American Heart Association, approximately 2.7 million Americans live with atrial fibrillation.

In a normal heart, the muscle contracts and relaxes to a regular beat. In patients with atrial fibrillation, the upper chambers of the heart – the atria – beat irregularly. This means the heart is unable to effectively move blood to the lower chambers – the ventricles. When blood slows down or is allowed to pool in the body, the risk of developing a blood clot increases. It can also increase your risk for stroke. About 15 – 20% of people who have strokes also have AFib.

If a blood clot comes loose, enters the blood stream and lodges in an artery leading to the brain, it can cause a stroke. This increased risk of blood clots is why patients with atrial fibrillation are typically put on blood thinners. Even though atrial fibrillation is the most common serious heart rhythm abnormality in people over the age of 65, many patients are unaware that it is a serious condition. Untreated atrial fibrillation doubles your risk of heart-related death and causes a four- to five-fold increased risk for stroke.

What are the symptoms of atrial fibrillation?

For many patients, the first sign of atrial fibrillation is a quivering or fluttering heartbeat. The abnormal firing of electrical impulses in the heart causes the muscle to quiver. Sometimes people with atrial fibrillation do not notice any symptoms at all. For these patients, their condition is only detected during a physical exam by their doctor.

For some patients, the following symptoms indicate something is wrong:

- General fatigue
- Rapid and irregular heartbeats
- Fluttering or “thumping” sensations in the chest
- Dizziness
- Shortness of breath coupled with anxiety
- Weakness
- Faintness or confusion
- Fatigue when exercising
- Sweating
- Chest pain or pressure

If you notice any of these symptoms, call your doctor to set up an appointment. If you experience chest pain or pressure, call 911. Chest pain or pressure is a sign you could be having a heart attack and medical care is needed immediately.

Who is at risk for atrial fibrillation?

Any person can develop atrial fibrillation, including children. But, the likelihood of developing atrial fibrillation increases with age and there are certain people who are at higher risk.

Typically, people with one or more of the following conditions are at a higher risk for atrial fibrillation:

- **Athletes:** a rapid heart rate called supraventricular tachycardia (SVT) is common among athletes and can trigger atrial fibrillation.
- **Advanced age:** the number of adults who develop atrial fibrillation increases with age. While atrial fibrillation is rare in children, it can and does happen.
- **Underlying heart disease:** anyone with heart problems including valve problems, hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, acute coronary syndrome, Wolff-Parkinson-White (WPW) syndrome and a history of heart attack can develop atrial fibrillation. The condition is also the most common complication following heart surgery.
- **Drinking alcohol:** binge drinking may put you at a higher risk.
- **Family history:** having a family member with atrial fibrillation can increase your chances of being diagnosed with the condition.
- **Other chronic conditions:** some people are at a higher risk because of underlying medical conditions including thyroid problems, diabetes, asthma and other chronic medical problems.

Because atrial fibrillation is a serious condition and can increase your chances of heart attack and stroke, it is important to discuss your risk with your doctor. NMH loves the community we serve and we want you to remember: 80% of heart attacks and strokes can be prevented through awareness, education, lifestyle changes and proper medical treatment! Healthy Heart Month is the perfect time to get proactive about YOUR heart health!