

Atrial Fibrillation and Women Podcast

Introduction

Hi everyone.

My name is Kathy Onwezen and I am a nurse practitioner here at the Harry S. Truman Memorial Veterans' Hospital. I work in the Cardiology Electrophysiology Clinic. In the Electrophysiology Clinic we treat patients with heart rhythm disorders.

February is American Heart and Go Red for Woman Month established by the American Heart Association to help women gain a better understanding of their risks for heart disease.

So, I would like to talk to you about a condition called atrial fibrillation or afib for short and how atrial fibrillation can affect women in different ways than men.

What is Atrial Fibrillation

Atrial fibrillation is the most common type of abnormal heart rhythm treated worldwide.

The heart pumps blood continuously through the body by squeezing its different parts. The top part called the atria squeezes first then the bottom part of the heart called the ventricles squeezes next creating a steady pattern or heart rhythm.

Atrial fibrillation is an abnormal heart rhythm that can cause a fast and irregular pulse. In atrial fibrillation instead of one electrical impulse moving through the heart; the atria send many disorganized electrical impulses into the top of the heart causing the atria to quiver or fibrillate (think of jello jiggling).

This quivering or fibrillation replaces the heart's normal heartbeat pattern and the body loses control over how fast the heart is beating. The adult heart normally beats about 60-100 times a minute. During atrial fibrillation the atria can beat over 300 times a minute and this is what causes many of the symptoms associated with atrial fibrillation.

The most common symptom associated with atrial fibrillation is fatigue. Other symptoms can include weakness, dizziness, fainting, palpitations, fast heart rates, chest pain, shortness of breath, or new swelling in your legs. However, some people have no symptoms at all.

The risk of atrial fibrillation increases as we get older. As we age our hearts age as well so aging (greater than 65) is the biggest risk factor for development of atrial fibrillation. Other risk factors include untreated high blood pressure, coronary artery disease, prior heart attacks, heart valve disease, congestive heart failure, diabetes, lung disease, thyroid disease, sleep apnea, obesity, excessive alcohol which is more than 2 drinks a day for women, smoking, and family history.

Atrial fibrillation alone is not dangerous. However, the side effects from atrial fibrillation can be life threatening. The biggest potentially life-threatening side effect is a stroke caused by atrial fibrillation. Strokes from atrial fibrillation are related to pooling of blood that occurs while the atria are fibrillating which increases the risk of forming a blood clot. If a blood clot forms and breaks loose it could result in a stroke or heart attack. Atrial fibrillation causes approximately 1 out of 7 strokes.

Due to the rapid heart rates that can occur with atrial fibrillation your heart muscle can become weak over time and lead to congestive heart failure if left untreated.

Both men and women are affected by atrial fibrillation and while it is more common in men, there are more women living with atrial fibrillation because statistically women live longer than men.

As far as risk factors women have a higher occurrence of high blood pressure and heart valve disease associated with atrial fibrillation and men have a higher occurrence of coronary artery disease and previous heart attacks.

Women are less tolerant to atrial fibrillation with longer duration of symptoms, decrease in quality of life, increased depression, and more frequent and longer episodes of atrial fibrillation than men.

Women with atrial fibrillation have a higher stroke risk compared to men and their strokes related to atrial fibrillation are often more severe.

There are many different options available for treating atrial fibrillation including medications and noninvasive and invasive procedures. Treatment is often dependent upon how atrial fibrillation is affecting your quality of life and heart health. To reduce your risk for stroke your provider may place you on medications to thin your blood.

It is important for women to understand signs and symptoms of atrial fibrillation and their risk factors for developing atrial fibrillation since they have poorer outcomes than men.

The earlier atrial fibrillation is diagnosed the easier it is to treat. Talk to your health care provider how you can reduce your risk factors for developing atrial fibrillation and an atrial fibrillation related stroke.

Signs of a stroke can include:

- Sudden onset of numbness or weakness in the face, arm, or leg, especially on one side of the body.
- Sudden difficulty with walking, dizziness, or lack of balance
- Sudden episode of confusion, trouble speaking, or difficulty understanding speech.
- Sudden difficulty with your vision in one or both eyes.
- Sudden on-set severe headache with no known cause.

If you are experiencing signs of a stroke call 911 immediately.

You can also find additional resources online such as:

Heart Rhythm Society

<https://www.hrsonline.org/guide-atrial-fibrillation>

American Heart Association

<https://www.heart.org/en/health-topics/atrial-fibrillation>

The VA's "Veteran's Health Library"

<https://www.veteranshealthlibrary.va.gov/Resources/VideoLibrary/?e=0#player:138,V1072>

Thank you for listening.