

Nearly 3 million Americans suffer from a heart condition called atrial fibrillation (AFib), an irregular, often rapid heart rate that commonly causes poor blood flow. AFib can lead to blood clots, stroke, heart failure and other heart related complications.

To combat blood clots and stroke in AFib patients, cardiologists will often recommend long-term anticoagulant medication, or blood thinners.

While blood thinners can be lifesaving medications, they also come with serious side effects, including the risk of dangerous heavy bleeding.

A new device called the [WATCHMAN](#) is now giving patients with AFib not caused by a heart valve problem a permanent alternative to blood thinners for stroke prevention.

The WATCHMAN Implant closes off an area of the heart called the left atrial appendage (LAA) to keep harmful blood clots that can form there from entering the blood stream and potentially causing a stroke.

“The device is a small plug,” explained Amit Mehrotra, Electrophysiologist, OSF HealthCare Cardiovascular Institute. “It has some prongs that sit in the heart that keep it there, and then the heart forms around that plug and keeps it in place so that the clot does not form in that portion of the heart.”

By closing off the LAA, the risk of stroke may be reduced and, over time, patients may be able to stop taking blood thinners.

“People who have atrial fibrillation are at risk for stroke, and need to be on a blood thinner. Often times those people have bleeding problems, and so they run into difficulty with blood thinners. The Watchman is a device that allows them to get off of blood thinners long term,” said Dr. Mehrotra.

“There’s a good portion of people who have a significant amount of bleeding with blood thinners, they have constant bruising with blood thinners, they can’t regulate the blood thinner level, so they are going to the hospital or the office every week, and it hurts their quality of life. And for those patients, the Watchman is a great alternative for them,” added Dr. Tamir Baman, Electrophysiologist, OSF HealthCare Cardiovascular Institute.

OSF HealthCare Cardiovascular Institute physicians in Peoria became the first in central Illinois to offer the WATCHMAN to patients, and the team at OSF HealthCare Saint Francis Medical Center has already completed three successful WATCHMAN implants. According to Dr. Baman, patient reaction to the device has been encouraging.

“It starts off with a little bit of shock, because they really can’t believe – they’ve been on blood thinners for 10 or 15 years, and they can’t believe there is finally an alternative out. And then when we talk to the patients, we have a bunch of people who are ready to go. They want to get

off that blood thinner. They love the fact that there's an alternative, and I'm very proud that OSF offers it," said Dr. Baman.

Implanting the WATCHMAN Device is a one-time procedure that usually lasts about an hour. Physicians access the heart through blood vessels in the leg. Following the procedure, patients typically need to stay in the hospital for 24 hours.

"They don't feel anything. They just come back," said Dr. Mehrotra. "They have an appointment at 45 days after implant to see and make sure the Watchman is appropriately in place, that the heart is healing around it, and that's when a decision is made if they can come off a blood thinner."

Nearly half of AFib patients eligible for blood thinners are currently untreated due to tolerance to the medication. The WATCHMAN is giving OSF HealthCare Cardiovascular Institute physicians a real way to help these patients improve their quality of life, something Dr. Baman takes pride in.

"It feels good. You always want to be on the cutting edge," he said. "You always want to offer patients something that will change their life, and I think this is one of those game changers."

Dr. Mehrotra agrees. "It's really exciting," he said. "All of us that practice medicine want to help people, and to be able to help people who didn't have an opportunity to get off a blood thinner otherwise feels really nice."

The WATCHMAN Implant has been approved in Europe since 2005 and is FDA-approved in the United States. It has been implanted in more than 10,000 patients and is approved in more than 70 countries around the world.

If you have AFib not caused by a heart valve condition and are seeking an alternative to taking blood-thinning medication, you may be eligible for the WATCHMAN implant. Our cardiologists do a comprehensive evaluation to determine if the procedure is an appropriate treatment option for you. Please visit OSFHealthCare.org/heart or call (309) 691-4410 to learn more.