

# "Watchman" Procedure Reduces Stroke Risk in AFib Patients

OSF Saint Anthony Medical Center is first in Rockford region with new surgery

Atrial fibrillation, commonly referred to as AFib, is when the two upper chambers of the heart beat irregularly and out of coordination with the two lower chambers of the heart. The result is less blood flow to the body that can lead to heart palpitations, shortness of breath and weakness.

Blood thinners are often prescribed, but there are some AFib patients who do not tolerate the medication. For them, a relatively new procedure is now being performed at OSF HealthCare Saint Anthony Medical Center, in Rockford.

It's called "Watchman" the name of the device implanted in the patient. Delivered by catheter, the device is placed in the left atrial appendage where 90 percent of blood clots attributable to AFib form. It is helpful in decreasing, but not eliminating, the risk of stroke.

*"So, a left atrial appendage occluder, which Watchman is one of many such designs, is a way to, essentially, cork, if you will or eliminate that left atrial appendage through a procedure that goes in through the vein as opposed to open heart surgery," says Dr. Edward Telfer, a cardiac electro physiologist at OSF Cardiovascular Institute.*

*"The track record for this is excellent across the country," says Dr. Asad Shaikh, interventional cardiologist at OSF Cardiovascular Institute. "The numbers, if you look - there's a significant amount of data that supports using this device."*

Dr. Telfer says while there is no such thing as a safe anti-coagulant, "Watchman" is specifically aimed at those AFib patients who have difficulty with blood thinning medications. The benefit of the procedure is that patients can eliminate such medications in a little as 45 days following surgery.

*"Coumadin, Warfarin or other novel anti-coagulants, says Dr. Farhad Farokhi, cardiac electro physiologist at OSF Cardiovascular Institute. "You need to stay on aspirin and Plavix. And that device will prevent or decrease the risk of bleeding strokes, significantly. And also prevents the blood clots from going from the appendage, from the pouch, to the brain or other organs."*

That was how Marilyn Cooper became a candidate for the procedure. The 84 year old former nurse's aid has a history of heart problems - to where she had a stent put in a couple years back following a heart attack. She's also been off and on blood thinners. She had her "Watchman" procedure earlier this year and was allowed to go home the next day. She would recommend it for patients with AFib, if only for the peace of mind.

*"It's kind of a safety thing," says Marilyn Cooper, a Watchman procedure patient. "And I feel more comfortable now that, they said, there was less chance of me having a stroke. And I feel relieved."*

Only 10 percent of those over age 70 will develop AFib, and of those, an even smaller percentage will qualify for the "Watchman" procedure. Still, doctors recommend being screened.

*"Have enough atrial fibrillation to warrant anti-coagulation", says Dr. Telfer. "Another percentage of people that have problems with anti-coagulation. And another percentage of people that are in that circumstance that, at least under current thought processes, would be better off with the procedure."*

*"It's always better to have more information than not," says Dr. Shaikh. "So, it never hurts to ask and to get that information. Ask whoever is taking care of you whether it's an option for you or not."*

Among the factors considered to determine a patient's eligibility for "Watchman" are risk of stroke, history of congestive heart failure, hypertension, diabetes, vascular disease, age and gender.

For more information, go to [www.osfhealthcare.org](http://www.osfhealthcare.org) or call the OSF Cardiovascular Institute at 815-398-3000.

The procedure is also available at OSF Medical Center Saint Francis, in Peoria.