

Script – Print – Listen to your heart

If you've ever felt your heart flip flop, skip a beat or feel like it's banging against your chest wall, it could be signs of atrial fibrillation.

NFL coach Jim Harbaugh knows the feeling all too well. Coaching his San Diego Chargers on October 13, Harbaugh left the sidelines during the first quarter of the Chargers win against the Denver Broncos with arrhythmia, also known as an irregular heartbeat. An arrhythmia is when the heart beats too fast, too slowly, or is out of sync. Symptoms include palpitations, low blood pressure, shortness of breath and fatigue.

Harbaugh has had similar episodes in the past. He's had a cardiac ablation procedure and says he may need another one for his current situation.

Cardiac ablation is a procedure where thin wires called catheters are threaded into a blood vessel from the groin and guided to the heart. Radiofrequency (heat) or cryotherapy (cold) treatment is used to destroy the cells causing the arrhythmia. Once the abnormal electrical signals are interrupted the normal heart rhythm can take over again.

Dr. Farhad Farokhi is an adult cardiac electrophysiologist with the OSF Cardiovascular Institute, who treats patients with Afib on a daily basis. He says medication can be the first line of defense when it comes to treating Afib, but sometimes medication doesn't work or cardiac ablation may be deemed the most effective method of treatment.

Dr. Farokhi says the procedure has become more common among both men and women, even children who experience Afib.

"The first thing we do is talk to the patient, get a history and see what kind of symptoms the patient experiences, and then document the abnormal rhythm with an EKG or longer-term heart rhythm monitors," says Dr. Farokhi. "We look at 24 hours, 48 hours to one week, two weeks or a month to document what kind of rhythm the patient has, and then we can correlate the rhythm with their symptoms. Then we can prescribe medications, or we can discuss and consider the option of cardiac ablation."

A successful outcome depends on the type of arrhythmia, any abnormality within the heart chamber, the patient's age and other irregularities the patient may have such as congestive heart failure or high blood pressure.

Within a few weeks after surgery, the patient should experience significant improvement.

"The patient will feel better, they won't have as many palpitations or fatigue, or shortness of breath," says Dr. Farokhi. "The heart will function more efficiently and in the long term the patient is going to feel better and have less chance of having heart rhythm issues or other heart complications. There is a significant benefit in terms of a patient's ability to exercise, having a better lifestyle and being on fewer medications."

The procedure takes anywhere from one to three hours. With any procedure there are potential risks including bleeding, infection and blood clots.

According to Dr. Farokhi, advancement in technology has also helped improve the cardiac ablation procedure.

"Technology has significantly changed. We now have very sophisticated mapping systems and ablations to treat abnormal rhythms. And it is very promising that in the near future, we can do very complex, abnormal rhythms with almost no risk of complications."

Dr. Farokhi adds that if you experience any heart-related symptoms, do not delay and seek help immediately. That's what Harbaugh did. He left the game and was checked out by medical staff before returning to the game. Now, he will wear a heart monitor for the next two weeks.

"When patients experience palpitations or abnormal sensations in their chest they should seek medical attention, talk to a doctor and do not minimize their symptoms because with any abnormal rhythm if they're diagnosed earlier, and treated earlier, you have a higher success rate with less chance of complications," adds Dr. Farokhi.

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