

National Atrial Fibrillation (AFib) Awareness Month

September marks National Atrial Fibrillation (AFib) Awareness Month. According to the American Heart Association (AHA), AFib is an irregular heartbeat (arrhythmia), a condition where the heart beats too slowly, too fast, or in an irregular way. When a heart is in AFib, it may not be pumping enough oxygen-rich blood out to the body. While AFib is not typically life-threatening, blood clots, stroke and heart failure are major complications caused by it.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) it is estimated that 12.1 million people in the U.S. will have AFib in 2030. And while it is the most common type of arrhythmia, many people do not know they have AFib until they are at a routine doctor's appointment or they are hospitalized for complications caused by AFib.

"Patients with atrial fibrillation can be asymptomatic for a long period of time and they don't know they are in irregular heartbeat. And that's why going to see a doctor, as simple as listening to the patient's heart and checking their pulse, we can detect irregular heartbeat and we can get an EKG and document atrial fibrillation," says Chadi Nouneh, M.D., Cardiology Medical Director, OSF HealthCare.

Dr. Nouneh recommends seeing your primary care physician (PCP) annually and to be aware of any factors that may increase your risk of AFib. Controlling these risk factors may prevent AFib from developing,

"If you're high risk for atrial fibrillation, which is age is the number one, family history, history of hypertension, history of diabetes, history of congestive heart failure, history of coronary artery disease. All of those are risk factors for atrial fibrillation. Sleep apnea is a very important risk factor and trigger for atrial fibrillation," explains Dr. Nouneh.

In addition to regular check-ups with your PCP, Dr. Nouneh recommends self-monitoring your heart at home. With the advancement of modern technology, there are a couple easy ways you can do this.

"Get a blood pressure machine, an automatic one. Check it on a daily basis. If you notice your heartrate is ranging between 80 to 150 and is irregular and telling you that, it's probably time to seek your doctor and talk to your doctor about that. The other option we have these days is the smart phone and smart monitoring," explains Dr. Nouneh.

While AFib is serious, Dr. Nouneh says that early detection and keeping it under control are key.

"Patients with atrial fibrillation usually, whenever we get to the point where their rate is controlled or get them back to sinus rhythm, they live a normal life. It's a very common arrhythmia and patients do really well with atrial fibrillation. The goal and the cure is to get them back to sinus rhythm," Dr. Nouneh says.

Signs and symptoms of AFib can include feeling that your heart is skipping beats or beating too hard, shortness of breath, chest pain, dizziness or fainting, fatigue, confusion, or swelling in the feet, ankles, and legs. However, according to the AHA, people who have AFib with no symptoms still have a five-times-greater risk of stroke.

An acronym has been created to make spotting a stroke easier: it is **BE FAST. Call 911 if you or someone else has any of these symptoms:**

- **Balance** - a sudden loss of balance or coordination
- **Eyes** - sudden blurred or double vision or sudden, persistent vision trouble?
- **Face** - one of side of the face droops down or the smile is crooked
- **Arm** - unable to lift an arm or keep an arm up without drifting down
- **Speech** - slurred speech, unable to correctly repeat a simple phrase, or unable to understand speech
- **Time** - it's time to call 911.

Seek emergency medical care and call 9-1-1 if you have severe symptoms such as chest pain or sudden shortness of breath or if you have signs of severe bleeding. See your healthcare provider soon if your symptoms are gradually getting worse, or if you have any new mild symptoms or side effects.