

Understanding Atrial Fibrillation

As a teacher of preschool and kindergarten kids, Marlo Klorfein has her work cut out for her.

It's all the more challenging because of a heart condition.

Marlo has atrial fibrillation - or A-fib - a type of rapid, irregular heartbeat, which was diagnosed about eight years ago.

"I never felt any symptoms. Occasionally I would get dizzy, but I just thought, oh, I stood up too fast."
– Marlo, Patient

Dizziness is a common symptom of A-fib. Others include: lightheadedness, palpitations, shortness of breath, chest pain or tightness, and fatigue.

"A vast number of patients will have what we call silent A-fib or atrial fibrillation, meaning that they have no symptoms at all. It's found on an EKG or just a routine physical exam."
– Kimberly Champney, MD, Cardiologist

Marlo's A-fib was discovered during a routine test for colon cancer.

"My doctor afterwards told me to go directly to my doctor and that my heart was going nuts." – Marlo, Patient

The heart is divided into four chambers. When it beats normally, first the upper two chambers of the heart, called the atria, contract, releasing blood to the lower chambers, called ventricles. Next, the ventricles contract, pushing blood to the rest of the body.

These contractions are controlled by electrical impulses that travel from the atria to an area called the atrioventricular or AV node...and then to the ventricles, keeping the heart beating in a steady rhythm.

A-fib occurs when the impulses spread through the atria in a rapid, chaotic way and bombard the AV node. The ventricles may contract faster and irregularly, and pump blood less effectively.

"A-fib can happen in anybody, at any time but it is something that tends to happen as we get older."
– Kimberly Champney, MD, Cardiologist

Though the exact cause of atrial fibrillation is often unknown, risk factors in addition to older age include: High blood pressure, underlying heart disease, diabetes, sleep apnea, and obesity.

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"Have you been having any palpitations? Marlo: Definitely, I've been having palpitations."

- Kimberly Champney, MD, Cardiologist

Sometimes episodes of a-fib can be triggered by excessive alcohol and caffeine, stress, or anxiety.

"Usually patients can maybe identify some of their triggers better than I can."

- Kimberly Champney, MD, Cardiologist

In some cases, atrial fibrillation may last only a short time but continue to reappear. In others, it doesn't go away. This is called persistent atrial fibrillation.

Marlo has persistent atrial fibrillation, which has required treatment, including medications.

Left untreated, A-fib can cause blood to pool in the atria because they are quivering and aren't pumping effectively. When blood does not circulate normally, clots may form. If a blood clot gets pumped out of the heart and goes to the brain this can lead to a stroke.

A-fib can also weaken the heart, resulting in heart failure, a condition in which the heart can't pump enough blood to meet the body's needs.

"I try to tell people to think about atrial fibrillation like a chronic illness. It's going to come and go and it can have some times where it's really driving you crazy but it's a chronic illness that can be managed."

- Kimberly Champney, MD, Cardiologist

For Marlo that also includes eating a healthful diet and staying as active as she can.

"I walk every day. I swim a couple times a week. I take pilates. I live a really healthy life. My mom had a stroke and her dad had a stroke. And so, I've seen what that looks like, and I really don't want to go through that." - Marlo, Patient