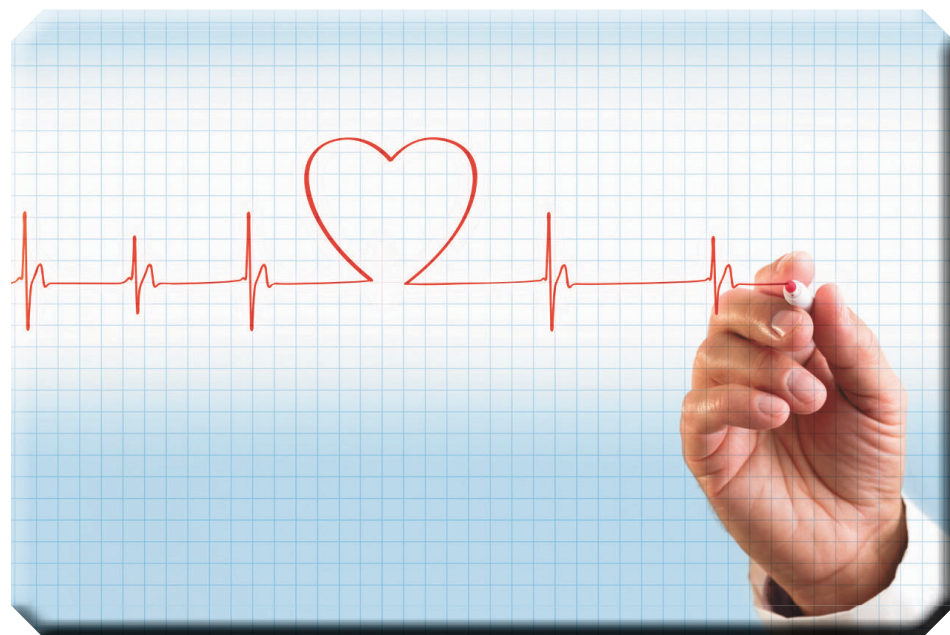


Signs of atrial fibrillation – and how to treat it



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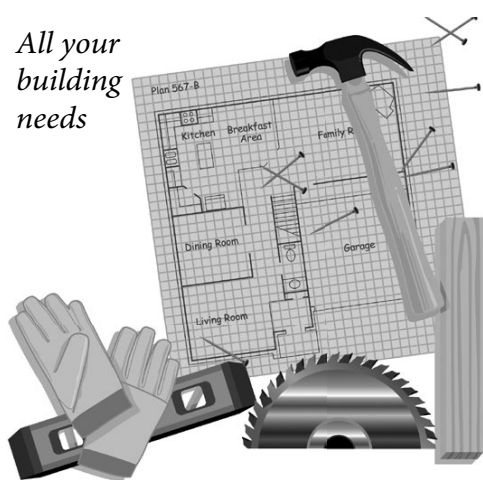
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Palpitations of the heart or uncomfortable sensations in the chest can be distressing. Thoughts of heart attack may come to mind, and that anxiety can only exacerbate the situation. While heart attack might be the first thing people think of when experiencing chest discomfort, atrial fibrillation may be to blame for such feelings.

Atrial fibrillation, also called AFib, is a quivering or irregular heartbeat that may lead to heart-related complications. The American Heart Association says that at least 2.7 million Americans are living with AFib. Although treatable, without proper diagnosis, AFib may lead to blood clots, stroke and even heart failure.

Many people with AFib experience no symptoms at all and are unaware they have it until it is discovered during a physical examination. For those who experience symptoms, The Mayo Clinic lists these as some of the more common:

- Palpitations, which can be sensations of a flip-flopping in the chest or even a racing feeling.
- Fatigue
- Reduced ability to exercise
- Lightheadedness
- Chest pain or shortness of breath
- Dizziness and weakness

When the heart is working normally, it contracts and relaxes in a beat. When a person has AFib, the upper chambers of the heart, called the atria, beat irregularly. They quiver and do not move

the blood into the ventricles in an effective manner. This irregularity can cause pooling or clotting of blood. Should a clot break off and enter the bloodstream, particularly in an artery leading to the brain, stroke may occur.

A proper diagnosis from a physician is needed before treatment can begin. An examination may include an EKG or ECG, which will show the heart's electrical activity as line tracings on paper. The spikes and dips in the tracings are called waves. An EKG will determine if the heart is pumping correctly.

AFib is more common among people with clogged arteries or diabetes and may develop following valve surgery. AFib also is more common in people with coronary heart disease. As a person ages, his or her risk for AFib increases. Stress also can be a major factor in triggering AFib, according to StopAfib.org.

Once AFib is diagnosed, managing risk factors and restoring a heart to normal rhythm becomes the priority. Doctors use a variety of medications to control heart rate, which may include beta blockers and calcium channel blockers. Medications to prevent stroke also may be prescribed. Surgical intervention may be necessary if medications aren't working.

Atrial fibrillation is a serious condition that requires treatment. Episodes can be managed and treated to help people live healthier lives.

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