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ATRIAL FIBRILLATION

You have been diagnosed with atrial fibrillation (AF). This causes the heart to beat in an irregular rhythm. This is the most common cardiac rhythm disturbance in the U.S., and increases with age and with underlying conditions such as high blood pressure, coronary artery disease (blocked heart arteries), heart valve abnormalities, and heart failure. It may also occur in the absence of any other heart problems (lone AF). It is not a life threatening problem in and of itself, but it is associated with some risks that are important to understand.

Sometimes, the AF may cause your heart to beat very fast, and may cause symptoms of palpitations (fluttering in the chest). If it beats fast enough, some patients may experience chest pain, shortness of breath, lightheadedness, and even fainting. A main part of the treatment is therefore, to control the rate at which the heart beats in the AF rhythm.

In some patients, it is possible to restore a normal heart rhythm (normal sinus rhythm or NSR). This may be done using either medications or a combination of medications and "electrical cardioversion" in which a patient is put to sleep for a few minutes, and an electric shock is applied to the chest. This is done as an outpatient. There are also some procedures, either with small tubes inserted into a vein and advanced to the heart, or on rare occasions surgery, that may be useful in returning patients to a normal rhythm. Sometimes, patients with AF may require placement of a pacemaker, but by no means is this true in most cases.

If a normal rhythm cannot be restored, patients can be very successfully treated by controlling the heart rate in AF. Some patients, however, are known to face an increased risk of stroke because of the fibrillation itself. Clots may form in the part of the heart that is fibrillating, and if they break loose, the clots can travel to the brain and cause a stroke. The risk of such a stroke can be reduced significantly using "blood thinners" which decrease the blood's ability to form clots. These medications can increase the risk of bleeding, although such bleeding is usually minor. In addition, the medications require periodic blood tests to monitor their effect and reduce the risk of bleeding.

Additional information can be found on these websites:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atrial_fibrillation
<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/atrial-fibrillation/DS00291>
http://www.medicinenet.com/atrial_fibrillation/article.htm
<http://www.americanheart.org/presenter.jhtml?identifier=4451>