

Louisiana Pharmacists Association

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Louisiana Pharmacists Association Educates Patients about Atrial Fibrillation

What is Atrial Fibrillation (AF)?

Atrial fibrillation is a type of abnormal heart rhythm where the upper portion of the heart, called the atria, does not contract properly. It is caused by interference with the normal rhythm produced by the pacemaker of the heart. Electrical signals begin elsewhere in the heart or in the veins connecting to the lungs, and spread through the heart in a disorganized manner. This causes the affected area to flutter rapidly.^[2] The heart may beat up as rapidly as 175 times a minute, while blood will pool in the top part of the heart due to the lack of proper pumping action.^[3] Some patients may show no symptoms at all, while others may experience signs such as:

- Palpitations (heart rate that sometimes changes for no reason)
- Heart rate over 100 bpm
- Fainting
- Shortness of breath
- Dizziness
- Chest pain
- Weakness
- Lightheadedness^[3]

Causes of AF

Many commonly prescribed drugs can cause AF, including Albuterol, Amiodarone, Diltiazem, Fluoxetine, Ipratropium bromide, and Ondansetron. If this is found to be the case, the patient should discuss with their doctor or pharmacist whether the risks of taking the medication outweigh the benefits, and if the medication should be discontinued.^[2]

Other risk factors for AF include alcohol consumption, high-dose steroid therapy, advanced age, coronary heart disease, hypertension, inflammation of the pericardium (the sac that surrounds the heart), obesity, diabetes, hyperthyroidism, sleep apnea, and family history of the condition.^[1]

AF Treatment Options

In some patients, atrial fibrillation may clear up on its own. If this is not the case, treatment is aimed at three major goals:

- 1) Blood clot prevention
- 2) Heart rate control
- 3) Rhythm control

Patients with AF are at an increased risk for stroke, so blood thinners often form a staple of treatment for patients with permanent AF. Medications to control heart rate include beta blockers, calcium channel blockers, and digoxin. Rhythm may be regulated by medications such as sotalol or propafenone. Alternatively, doctors may choose to regulate rhythm through a procedure called catheter ablation, where a wire is threaded through a vein to the heart and radio waves are sent through the wire to destroy the tissues that are causing the interfering signals.^[3] Outlook is good for patients with AF, and they can usually live normal and even active lives with proper medical care.

Pharmacists can play a key role in identifying patients who may be suffering from AF.

Your pharmacist can look over your medication list and history to identify drugs and disease states that may be putting you at risk, and help refer you to a physician for an EKG test that will allow them to examine your heart rhythm.

References:

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2. Miller, Douglas A. & James E. Tisdale. "Supraventricular Arrhythmias." *Drug-Induced Diseases: Prevention, Detection, and Management*. 2nd ed. Bethesda: American Society of Health-System Pharmacists, Inc. 2010.
3. National Heart Lung and Blood Institute. "Atrial Fibrillation." <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/health-topics/topics/af/> July 1 2011.

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The Louisiana Pharmacists Association, established in 1882, strives to promote the interests of all pharmacists of the State of Louisiana. For more information about the LPA and its benefits, contact Julie Fuselier or Phyllis Perron, LPA Co-Executive Directors at 225/346-6883 or visit our website at www.louisianapharmacists.com.

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