

Hearts Aflutter: Therapy Reduces Risks of Abnormal Heartbeat

The most common abnormal heartbeat is called atrial fibrillation (AF). About 2.2 million Americans live with this condition. While an occasional episode of AF is not life-threatening, stroke and heart failure can result if AF is left undiagnosed or untreated.

“As a person gets older, the chance of stroke from atrial fibrillation is five times higher,” says Dr. Amir Abolhoda, a University of California, Irvine Medical Center cardiothoracic surgeon who specializes in treatment of AF. “People need to realize that atrial fibrillation is not an innocuous problem. It’s not just a palpitation. Its persistence can lead to heart failure and other major complications.”

AF begins when one of the upper chambers of the heart, an atrium, quivers like gelatin instead of beating normally. Blood becomes stagnant, pooling in the atrium, where it can form a clot, which could eventually travel to the brain and cause a stroke.

Warfarin (Coumadin), a blood thinner, reduces the risk of stroke. However, some seniors cannot take warfarin because of risk of bleeding. Abolhoda specializes in a minimally invasive procedure called AF ablation, which has achieved a 90-percent success rate in converting AF to normal rhythm in appropriately selected patients.

The doctor performs the operation through small incisions in both sides of the chest. A special clamp applies radiofrequency energy and creates concise burns in the atrial tissue, blocking the source of AF formation.

“If someone might be a candidate, we work with our cardiologists and geriatrics specialists to assess all of the surgical risks,” Abolhoda says. “We can stop AF and its damaging results, and the sooner a person is treated, the greater the success rate.”



Eating Right: How to Satisfy Your Changing Nutritional Needs

Eating habits can change with age as a person’s metabolism slows and lifestyle turns less active. People can expect to eat less and choose different foods as the body slows down. However, if they are not careful, older adults may not be getting the nutrition their bodies need.

A common problem among seniors is not consuming enough protein and vitamins because meat, fresh vegetables and fresh fruit become more difficult to chew. Calcium also dwindles as individuals become lactose intolerant and stop drinking cow’s milk. Other situations that can throw a diet out of whack include the death of a spouse who did the cooking, or an injury or physical limitation that prevents shopping and safe cooking at home.

“Maintaining a healthy and balanced diet can be achieved with some simple steps,” says Alane Barrett, registered clinical dietitian with University of California, Irvine Medical Center’s Health Assessment Program for Seniors (HAPS). “The proper diet is so important for getting sufficient vitamins, minerals, fiber and water intake.” Her suggestions for boosting nutrition include:

Protein and calcium—Soy milk is packed with protein. Other options are lactose-free milk, cottage cheese and yogurt.

Vitamins and minerals—Try steaming vegetables or cooking them in soups or casseroles to make them easier to chew.

Barrett also advocates liquid food supplements and multivitamins. Even microwavable meals can work if they are low in fat and calories.

“Different people have different needs,” Barrett says. “If they can’t cook, we can steer them to many community resources such as Meals on Wheels that can help maintain a healthy diet with a variety of foods.”