

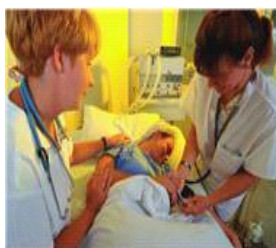
ASSOCIATION OF HEALTH CHRISTIAN PROFESSIONALS NEWSLETTER

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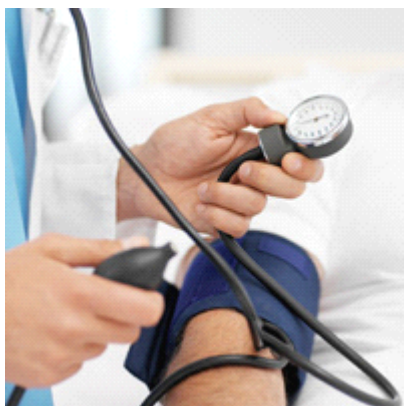


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7 Reasons You May Be at Risk for Atrial Fibrillation

Atrial fibrillation is a common heart condition that can increase your risk of stroke, and the symptoms often go unnoticed. But there are certain risk factors you can control to help you protect your heart.

By [Chris Illades](#) Medically reviewed by [Lindsey Marcellin, MD, MPH](#)



What heart condition affects more than 2.6 million people in the United States, with figures expected to reach as many as 12 million by 2020? The answer is atrial fibrillation, the most common type of irregular heartbeat. The number of Americans with the condition is expected to grow as baby boomers get older and life expectancy increases.

[Atrial fibrillation](#) symptoms can include a rapid pulse and heartbeat, palpitations, shortness of breath, dizziness, and feeling very tired — but it's also quite possible to have the condition and not recognize the symptoms.

"For every episode of atrial fibrillation that is recognized, there is probably one episode that is not recognized," explains David Wilber,

MD, professor and director of the Cardiovascular Institute at Loyola University's Stritch School of Medicine in Chicago. "Atrial fibrillation symptoms like fatigue or feeling lightheaded can be subtle. People who have had intermittent episodes of atrial fibrillation for a while may not be aware that they are having an episode."

Knowing atrial fibrillation risk factors can help you recognize the symptoms. In the absence of symptoms, ask your doctor to evaluate your heart rate.

Atrial Fibrillation Risk Increases With Age

"Atrial fibrillation is uncommon before age 50," says Dr. Wilber. "By age 80, about 10 to 20 percent of the population will have episodes of atrial fibrillation."

- As the baby boomer generation ages, there are about 160,000 new cases of atrial fibrillation every year.
- Older men are more likely to have atrial fibrillation than older women.
- Even though atrial fibrillation increases with age, half the people who have it are younger than 75.

Atrial Fibrillation Risk Increases With Heart Disease

"About 20 percent of atrial fibrillation can be caused by structural [heart disease](#)," Wilber says.

- Coronary artery disease can be a risk factor.
- Diseases that affect your heart's valves can be risk factors.
- Heart defects that you are born with can increase your atrial fibrillation risk.

High Blood Pressure and Atrial Fibrillation

Hypertension is also a major risk factor, and it is "one of the most common risk factors because [hypertension](#) is such a common problem," Wilber explains.

- About one in three U.S. residents has high blood pressure.
- High blood pressure increases the workload of your heart, which may trigger atrial fibrillation symptoms.
- High blood pressure increases your risk for stroke, the major complication of atrial fibrillation.

Alcohol May Trigger Atrial Fibrillation Symptoms

"Alcohol is a rare cause of atrial fibrillation, but like caffeine, it can be an irritant to the heart and can trigger atrial fibrillation symptoms," says Wilber.

- Heavy alcohol abuse or binge drinking has been shown to cause atrial fibrillation.
- "Holiday heart" is a condition in which a person experiences an episode of atrial fibrillation after drinking through a holiday weekend.
- A recent study found that heavy drinkers have a 50 percent higher risk for atrial fibrillation than non-drinkers.

Your Family History Could Put You at Risk

"Atrial fibrillation does run in families," Wilber says. "We are still learning about genes that may cause atrial fibrillation."

- Recent studies show that about 30 percent of people with atrial fibrillation have a [family history](#) of the condition.
- Some gene changes that cause inherited atrial fibrillation have been identified.
- Changes, or mutations, in these genes may disrupt the flow of chemicals that help regulate heart rhythm.

An Abnormal Thyroid Gland Could Be a Risk Factor

Your thyroid gland is an important gland in the front of your neck that helps regulate your body's energy levels. An overactive thyroid gland, called hyperthyroidism, can be a cause of atrial fibrillation.

"Hyperthyroidism may account for about 1 or 2 percent of atrial fibrillation," Wilber notes.

- Both atrial fibrillation and hyperthyroidism can cause a rapid heartbeat and palpitations.
- Treatment of hyperthyroidism may also control atrial fibrillation.

Sleep Apnea and Atrial Fibrillation

"There does seem to be an association between these two conditions," Wilber says, "but it is not yet clear how much treating one condition affects the other." Sleep apnea is a common condition in which your airway collapses during sleep, causing an interruption in breathing.

- Some studies now show that sleep apnea can be a trigger for atrial fibrillation symptoms.
- A study published in the *Journal of the American College of Cardiology* found that the chance of having an irregular heartbeat is 18 times higher after a recent episode of sleep apnea.
- More research is being done to see if treating sleep apnea can help people with atrial fibrillation.

The Mystery Surrounding Atrial Fibrillation

"In two out of three cases of atrial fibrillation, there is no identifiable risk factor found," says Wilber. Doctors are still learning about the causes of atrial fibrillation, but what is known is that atrial fibrillation is increasing in the United States. This irregular heartbeat already affects millions of people, and it becomes more of a risk as you get older.

Your best protection against atrial fibrillation is to know your risk factors and let your doctor know if you have any symptoms, particularly if you're over the age of 50. There are effective treatments available to control atrial fibrillation and keep your heart healthy for years to come.

You Aren't Indestructible or Indispensable — And That's Good



On the flight back from Mexico, I started to feel a shooting pain in my left arm. It was as if electricity was passing through my veins. I ignored this — as I had ignored the back pain that I'd felt on the cruise to Cancún and the extreme nausea after climbing the Chichen Itza pyramid. After all, I was indestructible. I had just turned around my startup — which had run into trouble after the dot-com bubble burst in 2000 and the economic shock of 9/11.

My company was now on track for 200% annual growth rates and 25% profit margins. It would be as big a success as my previous startup, which we had taken public. Nothing could stop me. I was wrong — my body could stop me. I wasn't indestructible.

Before I could understand what was going on, doctors put me on a stretcher and took me into

an operating room, where I was sedated. I woke up to learn that I had been having a major heart attack and needed placement of two stents in my arteries. The doctor said that if I had checked in two hours later, I would not have checked out — I would have ended up in the morgue. Fortunately, my wife Tavinder insisted that I see a doctor as soon as the flight landed. But I had not been sick for a decade and didn't have a personal physician. I didn't know who to call. So we just went to the nearest hospital: The University of North Carolina Medical Center. There, the nurse strapped an EKG monitor to my chest, reviewed the results, and started making phone calls. Then she pulled Tavinder aside to talk to her. I share this story because I want entrepreneurs who are as careless about their health as I was to realize that they too are vulnerable. You may not believe in anything called a work-life balance, but your body certainly does. You need to monitor and nurture your body. I used to have an obsession with building businesses and forgot about building health. I was focused on the destination instead of the journey. I caution you to not do the same. Get regular checkups, exercise, meditate and learn to relax. Do the things that are fun and good for the soul.

As it turned out, I had taken damage to my heart and couldn't go back to the rough and tough world of corporate management. So I took a year off and then did what my wife said: Focus on what brought me

the greatest personal satisfaction. She insisted that I forget about earning big money and that we make do with less.

I became an academic so that I could share my knowledge and experience with students. Later, I started researching topics related to U.S. competitiveness so that I could give back to the country. I started researching engineering education, entrepreneurship, innovation systems and immigration. Now I write about these topics and study advances in technology that will help solve humanity's paramount challenges.

It wasn't easy to crack the code of getting accepted into academia, but I figured it out. By volunteering my time to mentoring students and faculty members, doing research that was meaningful, and applying my entrepreneurial skills to academic problems, I was able to gain respect and acceptance.

A decade after my heart attack, I had appointments at Duke University's Pratt School of Engineering, Harvard Law School, UC-Berkeley School of Information, Stanford Law School, Emory University and Singularity University — all at the same time. (I resigned from Harvard and UC-Berkeley last year).

All this seems like a lot. How could this new life not be as stressful, you may ask?

Because I've learned to focus on doing what is most productive and effective while carefully listening to my body. When I start getting embroiled in heated debates and feeling stressed, I just turn everything off and disconnect from the world. I simply tell my colleagues and friends that I am not well and need to cancel all meetings for a day or more. I take it easy — go for a long hike, take a vacation somewhere, or just stay at home and read. What I've realized is that, just as I am not indestructible, I am not indispensable. The world can manage without me. No success is worth the toll it can take on your health. No amount of money can compensate for the time away from your family.

I know this advice doesn't apply to everyone and that I had a big advantage because I had enough savings to carry me through the rough times. When you are living hand to mouth, you have to do what you must in order to support your family and yourself. I completely understand that. But even when you are in this situation, you can make the most of what you have—focus on the positives in your work, help others succeed, meditate instead of watching TV, and so on.

Enjoy the journey and remember that sometimes, you can have more happiness with less.

Photo: [Kladej/Shutterstock](#)

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