

NOW Health

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HealthChoicesFirst Patient Handout

Atrial Fibrillation and Stroke Prevention

Atrial Fibrillation is a condition when the heart beats fast and irregularly. When the heart does this it can cause blood to pool and consequently clot, particularly in the top two atria of the heart. Once this occurs those clots can break off and travel to various parts of the body including the brain. Blood clots that travel to the brain can cause what's called a Stroke. A stroke is a very serious condition that can cause a wide variety of problems for a patient and in some cases patients can even die from stroke.

When a patient is diagnosed with Atrial Fibrillation they will be assessed by their family physician and in some cases will be sent to see a Cardiologist, particularly if they have any comorbid conditions. The Cardiologist will assess a patient's risk factors for stroke by using a scoring system called the CHADS score. The CHADS score looks at the following factors: congestive heart failure, hypertension, age greater than or equal to 75, Diabetes and previous stroke/TIA or Thromboembolism. If a patient has even one of these risk factors, it's very likely that patient will be prescribed what's called an Anticoagulant (also known as a blood thinner).

Anticoagulants are extremely important in stroke prevention and compliance while on them is crucial. Missing even one dose can put patients at a greater risk of stroke. There are now anticoagulants on the market that offer once or twice a day dosing and that can be taken with or without food. Your local pharmacist can help you with compliance by discussing such things as dosing, pill boxes, blister packs and dosette's to help you keep track of your medications.

If you are on anticoagulants and are finding compliance difficult, be sure to speak to your family physician, nurse or cardiologist to discuss whether you are on the best medication for you.

Custom Action Plan

If you are on an anticoagulant and you are experiencing bruising, sores that heal slowly and bleeding gums while brushing, it is important to stay on your anticoagulant and speak to your physician.

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If you experience bleeding in the stomach or bowl, bleeding in the brain (sudden severe headache), or any other major bleeding, you should stop taking your anticoagulant and go to the nearest hospital.

If compliance to your anticoagulant is difficult, speak to your local pharmacist to find out about ways they can help.

Carry information in your purse or wallet about your condition and information regarding your anticoagulant in case of an accident.

Protect yourself from cuts and bruising but wearing gloves when cutting or working in the garden.

If you believe you have taken too much of your blood thinner, contact your local health care practitioner or emergency department, even if there are no symptoms. Too much of an anticoagulant can lead to bleeding.