

Word for Word

Getting to the Heart of the Matter: Atrial Fibrillation vs. Atrial Flutter



The terms atrial fibrillation and atrial flutter may seem interchangeable. However, they are not identical and should not be confused.

Atrial fibrillation occurs when the atria, the upper chambers of the heart, beat irregularly and, often, very rapidly. They do so out of sync with the ventricles, the heart's lower chambers. Some patients with atrial fibrillation are asymptomatic, whereas others experience symptoms like weakness, shortness of breath, and a rapid, pounding heartbeat. Furthermore, atrial fibrillation may be sporadic or persist for quite a while. Although not dangerous in and of itself, atrial fibrillation can lead to very serious conditions, such as stroke and heart failure. Fibrillation can be detected using several methods, including electrocardiography, echocardiography, and blood tests.

Atrial flutter differs from atrial fibrillation in a couple of ways. First, although the atria and ventricles beat in sync, they do so too rapidly. Second, the atria beat regularly instead of erratically. A patient with atrial flutter will have a heart rhythm that is much more consistent than that of a patient with atrial fibrillation. Atrial flutter is similar to fibrillation in that the patient may not have symptoms and that it may increase the risk of stroke and heart failure. Fortunately, both conditions also have minimally invasive treatment options.

Keep these similarities and differences in mind when writing about these conditions.

References

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2. Mayo Clinic. Atrial fibrillation. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/atrial-fibrillation/symptoms-causes/syc-20350624>. Accessed November 2, 2021.
3. Mayo Clinic. Atrial flutter. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/atrial-flutter/symptoms-causes/syc-20352586>. Accessed November 2, 2021.

—Don Norwood

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