Atrial Flutter

Atrial Flutter is a heart rhythm that can cause the heart to beat very fast (*tachycardia*). It originates in the upper chambers of the heart (*atria)*. In Atrial Flutter, the top chambers of the heart (*atria*) often beat much faster than the bottom chambers of the heart (*ventricles*). Atrial Flutter has a regular "saw toothed" appearance and can cause the heart to beat up to 150 BPM (Beats Per Minute). Atrial Flutter can either be short lived (*paroxysmal*) or permanent.

CAUSES

Causes of Atrial Flutter can be many. Some of these include:

- Heart related issues:
  - Heart attack (*Myocardial Infarction*).
  - Heart failure.
  - Heart valve problems.
  - Poorly controlled high blood pressure (*Hypertension*).
  - Post-op Open Heart Surgery.
- Lung related issues:
  - A blood clot in the lungs (*Pulmonary Embolism*).
  - Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD). Medications used to treat COPD can attribute to Atrial Flutter.
- Other related causes:
  - Hyperthyroidism.
  - Caffeine.
  - Some decongestant cold medications.
  - Low electrolyte levels such as potassium or magnesium.
  - Cocaine.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

- An awareness of your heart beating rapidly (*palpitations*).
- Shortness of breath.
- Chest pain.
- Low-blood pressure(*Hypotension*).
- Dizziness or fainting.

DIAGNOSIS

Different tests can be performed to diagnose Atrial Flutter.

- An electrocardiogram (EKG) is a test that records the electrical activity of your heart.
- Holter monitor. This is a 24 hour recording of your heart rhythm. You will be given a diary. Write down all symptoms that you have and what you were doing at the time you experienced symptoms.
- Cardiac event monitor. This small device can be worn for up to 30 days. When you have heart symptoms, you will push a button on the device. This will then record your heart rhythm.
- Echocardiogram. This is an imaging test to look at your heart. Your caregiver will look at the heart valves and the ventricles.
- Stress Test. This test can help determine if the Atrial Flutter is related to exercise or if coronary artery disease is present.
- Laboratory studies will look at certain blood levels like:
  - Complete Blood Count (CBC).
  - Potassium.
  - Magnesium.
  - Thyroid function.

TREATMENT

Treatment of Atrial Flutter varies. A combination of therapies may be used or sometimes Atrial Flutter may need only one type of treatment.

Lab work:

- If your blood work such your electrolytes (potassium, magnesium) or your thyroid function tests are abnormal, your caregiver will treat them accordingly.

Medication:

There are several different types of medications that can convert your heart to a normal rhythm and prevent Atrial Flutter from reoccurring. Some of these include:

- Medications such as Beta Blockers, Cardizem, Verapamil or Lanoxin. These are long term maintenance medications that can help prevent the recurrence of Atrial Flutter.
- Specific anti-arrhythmic medications such as Amiodarone.
- Some people who have Atrial Flutter may need a blood thinner, such as Coumadin. A blood thinner helps to prevent clots from forming.

Nonsurgical procedures:

Nonsurgical techniques may be used to control Atrial Flutter. Some examples include:

- **Cardioversion**. This technique uses either drugs or an electrical shock to restore a normal heart rhythm:
  - Cardioversion drugs, such as Cardizem, may be given through an intravenous (IV) line to help "reset" the heart rhythm.
  - In electrical cardioversion, your caregiver shocks your heart with electrical energy. This helps to reset the heartbeat to a normal rhythm.
- **Ablation**. If Atrial flutter is a persistent problem, an ablation may be needed. This procedure is done under mild sedation. High frequency radio-wave energy is used to destroy the area of heart tissue responsible for Atrial Flutter.

SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL CARE IF:

- Dizziness.
- Near fainting or fainting.
- Shortness of breath.
- Chest pain or pressure.
- Sudden nausea or vomiting.
- Profuse sweating.

If you have the above symptoms, call your local emergency service immediately! **Do not drive yourself to the hospital.**

MAKE SURE YOU:

- Understand these instructions.
- Will watch your condition.
- Will get help right away if you are not doing well or get worse.

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