

Frances' story

Before I was diagnosed over the years I think I had a couple of A.F. episodes that lasted a couple of minutes each. I wasn't frightened, I was just curious to know what was happening! For 35 years or so I have also suffered from dizzy spells ranging from feeling lightheaded to not being able to cross the road. Since being on the medication for A.F. these episodes have diminished by about 80/85%. It is now thought I had been suffering from A.F. or there was some connection to it all these years.



"I've had five or six episodes of atrial fibrillation altogether. When A.F. kicks in it feels like my whole chest is vibrating, as though my stomach is rumbling or I have butterflies, but in my chest. The palpitations don't actually hurt, but you can't ignore them because the thumping is so intense. Afterwards I tend to feel really tired and a bit weak.

About four-and-a-half years ago, the symptoms lasted an entire night. The next morning I phoned my GP who ordered me to see him immediately. I was also told I wasn't to walk or drive to the surgery. It was then that I thought something was more serious than I had thought. The doctor was waiting for me when I got to the surgery. I had an ECG and 300 mg of aspirin and was then sent to the hospital for tests. Eventually a cardiologist diagnosed Lone Paroxysmal Atrial Fibrillation and suggested I take Aspirin (although we may review this because I've been getting terrible acidic reflux) and I was sent home.

Seven months later, I had an AF episode that lasted 18 hours. Again I rang the surgery and as luck would have it one of the doctors was on a house call close by and said he would come and see me. Within a couple of minutes he was calling for an ambulance and I was blue lighted to hospital. The strange thing was I felt calm, happy and not the least bit worried. I guess having 3 good looking paramedics and knowing if anything happened I had the best people around me that I was completely relaxed. I saw a great cardiologist who explained exactly what was happening and who gave me intravenous *Flecainide* to regulate the heartbeat. Within a couple of minutes I was in N.S.R. The next day I was discharged with a prescription for the tablet form of *Flecainide*. I think this was the turning point where I understood and accepted the diagnosis. So far the medication is keeping my A.F. under control most of the time.

I did have a short episode during the night in April [2010] last year which lasted about 6 hours. I dozed a little, read, watched T.V. etc waiting for the symptoms to pass. Now I don't advocate this as a treatment but I had invested in one of those mini exercise trampolines to

try and get fit but on using it the first time I noticed my heart gave a bit of a thump (once) and I decided to stop and not take any chances. The trampoline was in the bedroom and it entered my head maybe it would help shock the heart back into N.S.R. So at 5:30 am I got on the trampoline and jumped vigorously about 8/10 times, more out of frustration. I then sat on the bed and took my pulse. I burst out laughing to find I was indeed back in N.S.R. I was laughing more trying to imagine what my cardiologist would say and whether it could in future be prescribed as treatment and what my neighbours would have thought if they could have seen me!!!

I still have the odd ectopic beats– where you're aware that the heart has skipped a beat or where you get an extra beat – especially if I'm overdoing it or stressed about something. Most people have them at some point in their life and most athletes get them. They don't hurt but it is a reminder that I have A.F. One thing to remember is that the heart is trying to go into A.F but the medication won't let it, so it proves the medication is working.

Being diagnosed with atrial fibrillation hasn't really changed my life much. I live in a village in the country and I still go walking a lot. I'm a pretty active person with many hobbies. I can still even drink coffee, although some people with AF avoid it, but it doesn't seem to be a trigger for me as long as it isn't espresso. In fact I haven't found any food to be a trigger.

This past 15 months I have noticed odd feelings around the heart occasionally and sometimes a feeling of being under the weather, but 15 months ago my husband died suddenly. We were separated but still on good terms. His death has hit me hard and I have not known grief like it. Being next of kin I have had all the worries, stress and work that goes with sorting his estate etc. I am only mentioning this because with all that I have had to cope with (and still am) my heart (A.F) has taken it so well. I have had one episode of A.F (trampoline one).

For some reason my A.F. episodes tend to be 10 months apart but extending by a week each time. The last one should have been 10 months 3 weeks but I only managed 10 months 12 days but when I think what I had been through this last 15 months I was more than happy to let A.F have a few days back!.

It's helped that I've been so supported. I don't have any family left now but my best friend Jill is just wonderful. I don't think I could have coped without her. She's the kind of friend where I can just turn up for dinner, sit down and say 'budge up!' even though she lives in London and I in West Yorkshire.

The AFA forum and site is so helpful and useful. I don't write on there much, but I like to read all the messages to learn more about the condition. I think that's been the key for me – learning to understand my own body and doing what I can to help my condition. In turn if I can help others in the same way then I am so happy to do so.