

Our Doctor Writes

May 2009

In the dim and distant past I've written about this subject before. I make no excuses about writing again though. There is a condition called atrial fibrillation which is becoming more and more common. There are many reasons for this but in part it is due to our slowly increasing ageing population. Atrial Fibrillation or AF for short has many causes. It results in a malfunction of the normal electrical activity in the heart. The effect is that the upper chambers of the heart lose their co-ordination and wobble a bit like a quivering jelly. This in turn changes the way in which the natural pacemakers in the heart work and so the pulse becomes irregular. You can feel your own pulse easily by feeling with your index finger on the front of the opposite wrist blow your thumb. Stop reading this now and try and find it. Now keep feeling it for at least 20 seconds. The pulse should be very regular, a bit like a musical metronome. In young people it's normal for the rhythm to vary a little with deep breathing. I'll come back to your pulse in a moment.

AF is important for many reasons, quite often there are no symptoms but it may cause a feeling of palpitations or shortness of breath. Even more importantly though is that it dramatically increases the chance of having a stroke. This risk can be greatly decreased by taking warfarin to thin the blood. The latest guidelines issued by NICE (National Institute for Clinical Excellence) suggest that some people can manage with low dose aspirin. I've just been to a symposium at which it was clearly demonstrated that aspirin doesn't help as much as warfarin and is no safer as long as warfarin use is well monitored. If you know you have AF and you are not taking warfarin it would be well worth discussing this with your doctor. I think that it is highly likely that the next edition of the guidelines will reflect these changes in approach. We doctors tend to be reluctant to anticoagulate the very elderly for fear of causing problems when paradoxically that seems to be where the greatest benefits reside. Interestingly as doctor I think we are still influenced a lot by Hipocrates with his edict that doctors should first and foremost do no harm. This was certainly true in his day when the interventions that were made or suggested often made little or no difference. With modern day medicines and treatments you never get something for nothing but we shouldn't shy away from doing something which is usually very beneficial for the fear that the problem of the treatment may be, (unfairly) left to lie at our door.

Now back to your pulse. If you didn't know that you had AF and your pulse is irregular then it's important that you make an appointment with your doctor so that this can be looked into. It may mean that you have this condition but there are other causes of irregular pulse.

Best Wishes

Dr Tim Ballard