

## Heart to heart with Dr. Paul Dorian

(NC)—Matters of the heart are not to be taken lightly, especially when your health is on the line. But what if you or a loved one is at risk for a heart-related condition that you don't even know exists? This is often the case with atrial fibrillation, known more commonly as an irregular or rapid heartbeat. This chronic condition affects as many as 250,000 Canadians, yet a 2009 national survey conducted by Leger Marketing found that most people know very little about it.



This little-known condition is the most common form of heart arrhythmia, and often its most common symptom, heart palpitations (which some describe as a flopping feeling in the chest) is chalked up to everyday stress.

The fact that awareness levels are so low could mean that those living with atrial fibrillation are not being diagnosed by their doctor, placing them at increased risk for longer-term health problems.

The Leger Marketing survey, polling over 4,000 people, reveals that most Canadians could not make the link between atrial fibrillation and heart disease. Survey results also indicate that more than half could not name any symptoms associated with this disease even after the condition was described to them.

Dr. Paul Dorian, Director of the Division of Cardiology at the University of Toronto specializes in atrial fibrillation, and says we need to raise public awareness about this condition so people understand and recognize the risk factors and symptoms.

Here, he provides answers to questions that will help you recognize the signs of atrial fibrillation and better understand your personal risk.

**Q: How common is atrial fibrillation and what are some of the signs and symptoms to look for?**

**Dr. Dorian:** Atrial fibrillation is a very common heart rhythm disturbance that often goes unrecognized by many people. Most aren't aware either of the symptoms that accompany atrial fibrillation, such as palpitations or a rapid or irregular heartbeat, shortness of breath, dizziness, light-headedness, and occasionally even loss of consciousness. It's also important to understand that some people may have the disease and experience no symptoms. Others may have symptoms that come and go, and therefore never mention them to their doctor.

**Q: What are some of the risk factors associated with atrial fibrillation?**

**Dr. Dorian:** Heart valve disease and heart failure are associated with atrial fibrillation, but other more common health problems such as high blood pressure and excess weight could also be a cause of the condition. Keep in mind that having these risk factors doesn't necessarily mean that you will develop atrial fibrillation, but the likelihood of developing this condition also increases with age, so it's important to know what to watch for.

**Q: Is there a particular age group that is at highest risk for developing atrial fibrillation?**

**Dr. Dorian:** Atrial fibrillation can occur at any age, but it most often occurs in patients over the age of 65. Atrial fibrillation is going to become more prevalent – some have called it an epidemic – because we have more baby boomers entering their 70s or 80s.

**Q: Does having atrial fibrillation put you at risk for more serious health problems?**

**Dr. Dorian:** Yes, in fact, strokes are a common and very serious outcome of atrial fibrillation. It is estimated that 15 per cent of the 50,000 strokes that occur every year in Canada are due to atrial fibrillation. As we know, the risk of atrial fibrillation also increases with age, so it's particularly important for those individuals over the age of 65 to pay attention to how they are feeling. The earlier we diagnose it, the earlier we can give treatment, and the more strokes we're going to prevent.

**Q: What should people do if they think they are having episodes of atrial fibrillation?**

**Dr. Dorian:** Sometimes signs of atrial fibrillation may not last long, and they can come and go. If you feel your heart racing rapidly or have other symptoms that come on quickly – particularly if you are older and have high blood pressure – you should consult your doctor.

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