

## **Listen to your heart**

*Atrial fibrillation patient urges others to be attentive to this serious heart-related condition*

(NC)—Penny Lang never gave much thought to the fluttering feeling she felt in her chest every now and again. Like many others, she attributed the feeling to stress. That is, until the day she fainted and was taken to the hospital where she was diagnosed with atrial fibrillation – one of the most common forms of cardiac arrhythmia.



Atrial fibrillation is a condition in which the upper chambers of the heart beat in an uncoordinated and disorganized fashion, resulting in an irregular and rapid heartbeat. It affects approximately 250,000 Canadians and, if left untreated, it can have serious health consequences, including stroke.

Fortunately, Penny was diagnosed early and treated before more serious health complications developed. “I feel very lucky to have been diagnosed before anything too serious happened as a result of having atrial fibrillation,” says Penny, a nurse and avid traveler. “I think we need to raise awareness of this condition because many people I know have never even heard of it before.”

Results of a 2009 national survey conducted by Leger Marketing reinforce Penny’s message about the need for further education and awareness of atrial fibrillation. The survey revealed that 60 per cent of Canadians do not recognize that atrial fibrillation is a heart-related illness, and more than half of those polled<sup>1</sup> reported having symptoms that *could* be associated with this disease. This is particularly relevant for those 65 and over, the population at highest risk.

On an unaided basis, only five per cent of survey respondents who reported they were aware of atrial fibrillation mentioned heart palpitations as a common symptom associated with atrial fibrillation, a sensation that Penny describes as hummingbird wings fluttering in her chest.

In addition to heart palpitations and feeling faint, other atrial fibrillation symptoms to watch out for include:

- Dizziness
- Chest pain or pressure
- Shortness of breath

It’s also important to be aware of certain pre-existing conditions that may put you at increased risk of developing atrial fibrillation. Heart valve disease and heart failure are two of them, but more common conditions such as high blood pressure and excess weight are also associated with this disease.

While having these risk factors does not necessarily mean that you will develop atrial fibrillation, the likelihood of developing this condition does increase with age. It can develop at any age but it most often occurs in patients over the age of 65.

Dr. Paul Dorian, Director, Division of Cardiology, University of Toronto, believes that atrial fibrillation may even become an epidemic due to the aging baby boomer population in this country. He says Canadians should not hesitate to speak with their physician about their symptoms or if they have a medical history that puts them at increased risk.

"Atrial fibrillation can often present as an intermittent problem, so if you suddenly develop rapid palpitations or other sudden symptoms that last minutes, hours, or even days, and then go away, you should consult with your doctor," says Dr. Dorian. "This is particularly true for older patients with high blood pressure."

It has been almost two years since Penny was diagnosed with atrial fibrillation. She is now 63 years old and still struggles with managing her atrial fibrillation symptoms, but is happy that she is being treated to avoid further complications. She urges anyone who thinks they may be at risk to visit their doctor to get the appropriate diagnosis and treatment.

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