What Causes Swelling in AFib Patients?

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AFib and Swelling

Swelling of the hands, feet, or other parts of your body can occur due to many health issues. If you have atrial fibrillation (AFib), your irregular heartbeat may make your heart pump less effectively. This may result in swelling of your hands, feet, or other body parts. So, what is the exact connection between AFib and swelling?

If you have a new onset of swelling, or if swelling increases, contact your healthcare provider without delay. If you experience swelling accompanied by shortness of breath or chest pain, seek emergency medical assistance immediately.

Where Can Swelling Occur?

Swelling due to an accumulation of fluids may arise anywhere in your body. Fluid accumulates most readily in parts of the body that are furthest from your heart, including your hands and feet.

Blood vessels in your hands and feet are smaller than those in your chest and abdomen, so the force of the blood within those areas is smaller too. This combination of smaller vessels and less force make fluid accumulation in the hands and feet occur when other health issues are present.

Your feet, ankles and legs are especially prone to swelling due to gravity. If you are bed- or chair-bound, you may experience swelling in the lower back or genitals due to gravity.

Types of Fluid Accumulation

Types of swelling you may experience include:

- Edema, or swelling due to an accumulation of fluids. You may experience periorbital edema, which is swelling around the eyes when you wake up in the morning, particularly if you sleep on your abdomen.
- Pulmonary edema, or fluids accumulating in lung tissues. This condition is a serious problem that requires prompt medical attention.
- Congestive heart failure (CHF) is the swelling of the heart muscle results and may be acute or chronic.
- Pericarditis, or fluid accumulated in the exterior tissues of the heart.
- Ascites, or is swelling in your abdomen, especially if your liver or kidneys are not functioning optimally.
- Widespread or generalized edema throughout the body is called anasarca by health care professionals.

Comprehensive Treatment

Effective treatment of swelling requires a multifaceted approach, so a comprehensive treatment plan must be developed. Work with your health care provider to develop a treatment plan that suits your needs.

Implement strategies at home to reduce swelling. For example, if you have swelling of your feet, elevate them several times each day. Apply special elastic stockings before you get out of bed each morning. Over-the-counter elastic stockings may be purchased at large chain stores and pharmacies. Your healthcare provider may provide you with a prescription for special hosiery.

Take steps to reduce the likelihood of fluid building up. Medication and dietary strategies are key aspects of a plan to help you to manage edema effectively.

By working with your cardiologist and other members of your health care team, you will be able to reduce swelling, discomfort and the risk for complications that may result from edema.

Dietary Approaches for Managing Edema

Ask your cardiologist or nutritionist for individualized information about dietary steps to help you to manage edema. You may need to follow a special diet that restricts salt or fluids to a precise amount each day. Here are some general tips for preventing and relieving fluid accumulation:

- Read product labels carefully. Most of the salt we obtain is not from salt added at the table but from hidden sources.
- Baked goods, including bread, contain salt. Baking soda and baking powder contain sodium.
- Hidden salt is found in canned vegetables and jarred items, such as pickles, condiments and pasta sauce.
- When reading product labels, do not simply read the ingredient list for the presence of salt. Check the nutritional panel information. It will specifically tell you how much sodium is in a product. Pay attention to portion sizes when evaluating sodium content.
- Minimize your intake of processed and packaged foods. They often contain poor ingredients and a great deal of salt. If you choose to purchase packaged or processed foods, select those that are labeled as salt- or sodium-reduced.
- When making purchases, keep in mind that the following words indicate the product contains salt: brine, sea salt and sodium.
- Meat often contains solutions that are supposed to help them remain tender and juicy. Poultry and ham often contain a large percentage of these solutions. These additives are often little more than cocktails of water, salt, tenderizers and preservatives.
- Use salt substitutes, herbs, spices and lemon juice as alternatives to salt when cooking or at the table. Make your own blends or purchase ready-made products. Light salts are readily available at grocery stores.

Tips for Preventing and Reducing Swelling

In addition to eating well, you can help to prevent the buildup of fluids in your hands, feet and other body parts by taking additional steps. These interventions will also serve to decrease edema, should it occur:

- **Monitor your body for signs of swelling**. Report new or worsening edema to your health care provider promptly. You may need a medication change, further diagnostic evaluation, or other treatments implemented.
- **Participate in a regular exercise program**. This aids circulation of all of the fluids in your body and improves the health of your entire body. Do not begin an exercise program without consulting your health provider first. If you have multiple health issues, you may benefit from a rehabilitation program.
- **Alternate activity and rest**. Change your position regularly. Do not sit with your legs crossed. Move around frequently. Avoid sitting for long periods at a time. If you must sit for extended periods, shift your position and shake out your hands and feet frequently. While sitting, keep your legs elevated.
- **If you are traveling, take frequent breaks.** Get out of the car and walk around. Consult with your health care provider prior to flying or traveling on an extended trip.
- **Use pillows to elevate swollen extremities while in bed.** If you suffer from severe generalized edema, you may need to have a short period of bedrest. Consult with your healthcare provider before implementing a period of bed rest for more than a day or two.

AFib and Swelling: The Bottom Line

Swelling is an indicator of your body’s state of health. Pay attention to the messages your body gives you. By implementing home strategies in association with medical interventions, swelling can be prevented or reduced. Your level of comfort and general level of wellbeing can be optimized.