

Personal stories used to help build atrial fibrillation awareness

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Who better to help raise the awareness of risks, symptoms and treatments for atrial fibrillation (AFib) than people who are living with it? That's the idea behind a new initiative of the American Heart Association.

The [AFib awareness campaign](#) features videos of real people telling their stories about what it's like to have or care for someone with AFib. It started as a small pilot program in the association's Founder's Affiliate, which covers eight northeastern states. The expanded initiative focuses on U.S. cities where AFib rates are high—New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia and Seattle—and aims to increase awareness of AFib signs and symptoms and the need to seek [medical care](#).

Among the important messages:

- AFib is common. Estimates are that between 2.7 and 6.1 million people in the U.S. have AFib, according to Larry A. Chinitz, M.D., president of the New York Board of the American Heart Association and director of cardiac electrophysiology and cardiac rhythm management at the New York University (NYU) Medical Center.
- Having AFib increases one's chances for stroke, other [heart](#) conditions—even death. "AFib is a major cause of stroke. Recognizing symptoms and getting quick preventive treatment can reduce this risk," said Chinitz. "AFib also impacts cardiac function, cardiac output, exercise capacity and lifestyle. Given its

prevalence, AFib is an enormously important problem."

- Many don't know that AFib can affect people of all walks of life, including young, old and seemingly healthy adults. Sometimes, it strikes when people have heart disease. But people who do not have heart disease can get AFib. Risk factors for AFib include advancing age, [high blood pressure](#), obesity, alcohol/drugs, hyperthyroidism and sleep apnea.
- While some with AFib have no apparent symptoms, those who do often notice their hearts are racing or fluttering, which can leave them feeling dizzy, weak or nauseous. An irregular heart beat might seem like nothing, but for people with AFib it can profoundly affect quality of life, greatly increase stroke risk and the risk for other heart conditions, as well as death, according to Chinitz.
- Seeking medical care for AFib symptoms is vital. "One of the most important things a person who notices changes in his or her heartbeat rhythm can do is seek medical care. AFib can be controlled and stroke risk reduced with medications and nonsurgical treatments," Chinitz said.

Karen Christensen, a former professional ice skater and now an ice skating instructor, is one of those people and a face in the AFib awareness campaign. At 52, Christensen has been living with AFib for almost 20 years.

"I first noticed AFib a few months after my son was born," Christensen said. "My heart would start racing. I'd get lightheaded and weak. At first, I thought it was a fluke and maybe I had eaten too quickly. Then it started lasting longer, and that's when I went to the doctor."

Today, Christensen's AFib is under control. Her message: Even with AFib, you can live your life to the fullest.

"I know it can be scary. But you really need to address the symptoms early because of the risk of stroke," Christensen said. "Once you get it checked out and treated, you can live a full, happy life. Look at me. You wouldn't expect someone like me to be skating around all day long, but I do, and I have AFib."

The AFib awareness information will be shared at live AHA events and in hospitals, and distributed via social media, traditional and online media.

The effort will focus on [people](#) at higher risk of AFib: seniors who have high blood pressure or existing [heart disease](#). Additional emphasis will be placed on reaching African-American and Latino communities at multicultural events and presentations through the American Stroke Association's Empowered to Serve initiative.

The AFib awareness pilot and the expanded initiative are sponsored by the Bristol-Myers Squibb-Pfizer Alliance.

Provided by American Heart Association

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