

Atrial fibrillation significantly increases a person's risk of serious complications and death from COVID-19

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A new study from researchers at Intermountain Healthcare in Salt Lake City finds that patients with atrial fibrillation, the most common type of heart arrhythmia in adults, are at significantly higher risk to experience serious complications from COVID-19 illness. Credit: Intermountain Healthcare

A new study from researchers at Intermountain Healthcare in Salt Lake City finds that patients with atrial fibrillation, the most common type of heart arrhythmia in adults, are at significantly higher risk to experience serious complications from COVID-19 illness.

The study found that patients with a history of atrial [fibrillation](#) who have COVID-19 illness are not only more likely to need hospitalization, ICU and ventilator support, but nearly 62% more likely to suffer a major cardiovascular event, such as a heart failure hospitalization, and 40% more likely to die than individuals who don't have a history of atrial fibrillation.

"We often think of atrial fibrillation as more of a nuisance arrhythmia that can cause unpleasant symptoms and some negative clinical impacts, but is generally not life-threatening," said Michael J. Cutler, DO, Ph.D., the lead investigator of the study and a heart rhythm specialist at the Intermountain Healthcare Heart Institute. "However, the findings of our study suggest that patients with atrial fibrillation are at higher risk than the general population for serious complications from COVID-19 illness."

Atrial fibrillation, which affects more than 12 million Americans, is an irregular and often very rapid heart rhythm abnormality involving the upper chambers of the heart. Common symptoms of atrial fibrillation include palpitations, shortness of breath, and weakness. Having atrial fibrillation increases a person's risk of stroke, heart failure, and other [heart](#)-related complications.

Findings from the study by Dr. Cutler and his colleagues were presented this week at the American Heart Association's 2021 Scientific Sessions.

For the study, researchers examined 3,119 Intermountain Healthcare patients who tested positive for COVID between March 2020 and May

2021, and who also had a prior atrial fibrillation diagnosis.

The Intermountain researchers found that these patients did clinically worse than patients without a previous atrial fibrillation diagnosis.

Specifically, previously diagnosed atrial fibrillation patients were more likely to require hospitalization, oxygen support, ICU care, and ventilator support. Additionally, they were 61.5% more likely to suffer a major cardiovascular event (ex. [heart failure](#) hospitalization), and 40% more likely to die because of the COVID-19 illness.

Based on these results, Dr. Cutler said that patients with atrial fibrillation should know that they are in a higher risk category, and must take appropriate precautions against the virus, like getting vaccinated, wearing a mask and social distancing, when appropriate.

Knowing patients with atrial fibrillation are at high risk for complications and death should also influence how clinicians treat [atrial fibrillation](#) patients with COVID-19 illness.

More information: Conference: [professional.heart.org/en/meet ... /scientific-sessions](https://professional.heart.org/en/meetings/scientific-sessions)

Provided by Intermountain Healthcare

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