

Learnt the hard way! How foods affect my arrhythmia.

I have re-entry tachycardia, which typically presents for ten to thirty seconds, and which used to degenerate into PAF lasting up to 24 hours. I won't bore you with my full story, but if you are interested it can be found at <http://www.atrialfibrillation.org.uk/files/file/Newsletter%20Jan%20Chris%20H%202009%20Issue%203%20page%2020-21.pdf>

I should add that, following an ablation procedure at the John Radcliffe, Oxford, my symptoms are hugely better, but my food experiences might help others to learn how to spot foods that might effect them.

Early on, I was habitually using nose drops to clear my nose at bed time and often woke up in the night with arrhythmia. One weekend I had run out of nose drops, and had no arrhythmia in the night, or feeling of "impending arrhythmia" and realised that there could be a connection. Looking up the potential side effects of the particular nose drops I found "Tachycardia/palpitations. Other cardiac dysrhythmias", which also applied to several other decongestants. I realised then I needed to read all labels!

So nose drops was the first item on what became my "avoid" list, and I also taught myself to recognise a particular feeling after I had eaten something that had the potential to give me an arrhythmia. The feeling is difficult to describe, but is a slightly agitated, slightly flushed feeling which I learnt to recognise, similar to having too much coffee and, yes, coffee, which I love, was the second item on my list. In time, I have learnt that not all decaff coffees are equal: some are fine, but some can give me an arrhythmia and I am now very cautious and always ask which brands are used when I have coffee out. Interestingly, for me, I can drink weak tea, despite it giving some people problems – which goes to show that we are all different but that being aware can help problems being recognised. I also discovered that a lot of other drinks such as Colas and high energy drinks caffeine as do some tablets, so now take care using these.

After a "heavy" few days looking after elderly parents a hundred miles from home, we were driving back in the late evening, feeling decidedly hungry, and passed a take-away. Soon I was tucking into a delicious portion of fried rice and sweet-and-sour sauce. Just over an hour later and with no warning I suddenly went into really bad AF which ended up in A & E. A little web research indicated that MSG, monosodium glutamate, glutamate, or "umami" in Japanese, commonly used in Chinese food, have arrhythmias as one of their side effects. The web research also made me realise why I felt "hyper" after some cheeses, particularly Parmesan, which contain high levels of both natural glutamates and something called Tyramine. I was amazed to find that crisps, faggots from the butcher, thai fish sauce, and take away fried chicken may all contained MSG. Even certain fermented sauces caused me similar effects, so my "avoid" list continued to grow.

Once, on holiday, my wife and I ate a 250 gram bar of dairy chocolate on empty stomachs, but I had a string of tachycardias an hour later! I hadn't eaten anything else since breakfast, and web research and subsequently my GP confirmed that the theobromines in some chocolate were the likely culprit. But I LOVE chocolate ...however, what I have learnt since, which applies to other things, is that I can often get away with a little of what I like in moderation, but with chocolate I have to then pass it to my wife to hide away otherwise my chocolate addiction will take charge!

I have always enjoyed alcohol but very much in moderation. From the start of the heart rhythm disorders I was given medical advice to avoid alcohol, so I was cautious and declined to drink. Over the years I have heard conflicting advice so I have started, just on very special occasions to have half a glass of bubbly or a wine glass of beer and have had no ill effects, but I am still instinctively afraid to have more.

Thankfully, since my ablation, my arrhythmias have been MUCH better, and thankfully I've not had AF for several months. However, I still can't escape my food "triggers" and too much chocolate is likely to give half an hour or so of ectopics, and cheese inevitably results in several hours of ectopics. So I am REALLY careful with food, I have gone up to 10 days without being aware of any arrhythmias, but now, because things are overall so much better, I take a slight risk sometimes for things that I particularly enjoy!

Chris H 14th March 2010.