

## ***I had symptoms of AF when I was in my twenties***

### **Julia's story**

*Julia had several AF episodes at a relatively young age. After other complications with her health and going into AF during a catheter ablation, her heart has finally been at normal rhythm. This is her journey in her own words.*



*Julia with her "Spanish stallion", Bizarro*

I was first aware of my heart beating very fast, making me feel slightly faint in my late twenties.

When I was 30, after having my daughter, I had to stop my car with her in the back as I thought I was having a heart attack! I stopped for about twenty minutes by the side of the road until I felt ok to drive. When I arrived at my aunt's she took me to her doctor where I had an ECG, which was normal.

A couple of years later after the birth of my son, I was at home when I went into very strong irregular palpitations. I sat in the car for a bit but I could see my chest leaping about! On arriving home my mum called the GP and he tried massaging the blood vessel in my neck but in the end said I needed to go to A&E.

# **My heart was running about 275+ beats per minute!**

In A&E I was wired up to a heart monitor, put on a heparin drip and given some intravenous antiarrhythmic drugs.

My heart was running about 275+ beats per minute so I tried not to look at the monitor!

I was put on sotalol to control my heart rate and informed that it was safe to feed my baby, although I was then given daily aspirin and told I would have to bottle feed my son. I knew nothing

about AF so tried to look it up on the Internet. It seemed to be a problem of older people with existing heart problems, so I felt quite alone and scared.

Soon after my son was born I moved house and came under the care of a cardiologist in Ashford, Kent. The drug sotalol made me very tired with cold hands and feet and so I was prescribed to change to flecainide which I seemed to tolerate much better. Following antiarrhythmic drug treatment, I learned of catheter ablation and was put on a waiting list.

In 2000, I went to St Thomas's hospital for an ablation. My heart went into AF on the table, so they shocked it and then tried to map it but there was too much activity so they couldn't do anything.

I was devastated to wait a year for nothing.

# **I find when I am fighting a virus or another health problem, AF likes to get active**

After this I wrote to Dr Michel Haisaguerre in France, who had pioneered ablating around the pulmonary veins (an area where AF often originates) he said as I was young and fit and coping, at the present time the risks in my case outweighed the benefits!

Now with a diagnosis of paroxysmal AF, I joined a group of fellow sufferers online and we exchanged information. I started taking daily magnesium, staying as un-stressed as possible. And when I did get runs of AF, I sat quietly and focused on slow, deep breathing. Things went smoothly

# **I went for an ablation. My heart went into AF on the table...**

for several years despite undergoing surgery for other things. I find when I am fighting a virus or another health problem AF likes to get active.

In 2007, I had to move the family and my horse business to another part of the country; this was a very traumatic time and resulted in a couple of big episodes of AF. I was becoming quite breathless so was referred to a specialist at Papworth. He suggested a PVI (pulmonary vein isolation). This was a major operation although it was done with a catheter and I was very sore afterwards.

I went home and after a couple of days rest did too much – a BIG mistake. I was still on antiarrhythmic tablets and flecainide but collapsed a week later and was rushed by ambulance to my local A&E.

Initial thoughts were that I had blood clots in my lung and a possible infection. My heart was inflamed and I needed a long period of recovery.

**After my  
ablation, my  
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down and I had  
nearly three  
quiet years...**

A couple of months later I went into what I thought was AF and ended up back in A&E, this time it was difficult to decide what it was. My heart was nearly 300 beats per minute but more regular. This time it was SVT. I was injected with adenosine, which was very scary and a horrible feeling but my heart got back to normal quite quickly.

Two months later I returned to Papworth where I received an ablation for SVT. After my ablation, my heart settled down and I had nearly three quiet years, signed off from the specialist and no heart medication.

In June 2011, I had a violent headache with vomiting and as a result went into what I thought was AF. I was cardioverted with flecainide in A&E. I then went home and went back into a bad rhythm. Back to A&E, head scan, lumbar puncture and then spent a week on the cardiac ward.

**My heart was  
nearly 300 beats  
per minute but  
more regular...**

**This time it was  
SVT**

I was now in permanent atrial flutter. For the first time I had to take warfarin, which I hated .Finally in August 2011, I had my fourth ablation where a couple of veins had rejoined and some more roof lines were made. As the roof lines were made I went back into normal rhythm for the first time in weeks. I stayed on warfarin for a couple of months but it has taken over a year to finally feel I am getting back to normal .I was taking a small dose of beta-blocker a day but stopped it after a year and have just had

three days in hospital in November 2012, when I went into AF after being sick. I was chemically cardioverted with a stronger drug this time, amiodarone, and my heart went back to normal rhythm within twelve hours. I could have further ablation surgery but at the moment things are quiet and hopefully they will stay that way.

AF has made a big impact on my life but it has not stopped me doing things and the more pro-active I can be and the better informed, the easier it is to cope with. Knowing when I need to listen to my body and rest is essential and avoiding stress as much as possible is also critical at keeping AF quiet.

But as my cardiologist says after 15 years 'look how far you have come!' 😊

**Julia Alemany-Bird; Wisbech, Cambridgeshire (2013)**

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