Cardioversion

People with atrial fibrillation (AF) or atrial flutter may have symptoms even when their heart rate is controlled. Early onset AF can be reversed with oral antiarrhythmic medications like amiodarone, sotalol, flecainide, dronedarone and propafenone. However, at normal doses, this may take several days or weeks to be effective. The drugs are not all suitable or safe for everyone and a cardiologist or arrhythmia specialist must assess the patient before prescribing such medication.

Using a higher-than-normal single dose (a 'pill-in-the-pocket' approach) can be successful, but at first this must be done in hospital to confirm patient suitability and outcome.

Alternatively, a clinician may suggest cardioversion (CV) by to get the heart back to the normal (‘sinus’) rhythm. There are three main methods: medical, electrical and internal.

Medical cardioversion

Who is it appropriate for?
People who have taken oral antiarrhythmics for some time, but these have not worked.

Medical cardioversion involves using injections of antiarrhythmic drugs like flecainide, sotalol, ibutilide and amiodarone. No anaesthesia or sedation is needed. Depending on the drug, the injection may be given over a period of 10 minutes (say with flecainide) or up to 24 hours, for example with amiodarone.

During this time the electrocardiogram (ECG) is monitored continuously. Usually the arrhythmia will stop within minutes or at most one or two hours after the injection, except with amiodarone. The ECG may still be monitored for up to a few hours afterwards to be sure that any abnormal rhythm is quickly detected and treated. When the heart rhythm is stable, patient is discharged and monitored regularly.

Patients with implanted devices or allergies need to report this to their doctor before undergoing any kind of cardioversion.

Electrical cardioversion

Who is it appropriate for?
Patients for whom medical cardioversion has not worked or when cardioversion is urgent.

This technique is also known as 'external' cardioversion or DCCV, and involves using an electric shock to reset the heart’s rhythm. It can be highly effective in carefully chosen patients.

For at least four weeks beforehand, an AF patient will need to take an anticoagulant to reduce the risk of a stroke. Often, prescribing an antiarrhythmic drug such as amiodarone for one or more months beforehand means that the success rate of the electrical cardioversion can increase from 30 to 80% or more at one year. It is wise to discuss taking antiarrhythmic drug treatment before and after the procedure with the doctor.

Patients are required to fast before the procedure. Electrode patches or plates are positioned on the back and front of the chest, or on the upper right and lower left of the chest. The patient is linked to an ECG monitor connected to the cardioverter/defibrillator. An injection of short acting anaesthetic or powerful sedation is given so that the patient is asleep or totally unconcerned during the procedure.

The cardioverter (defibrillator) delivers a shock simultaneously with a heartbeat. Often a single shock is successful, but sometimes several are needed at increasing energy levels or with different electrode positions.
The patient wakes up within minutes and quickly regains full control. The ECG is monitored until full recovery. Patients are usually allowed to go home after a few hours. A friend or partner should come to hospital with the patient as they are advised not to drive for 24 hours after the procedure and it is best for someone to stay with them on the night after the procedure to see they are all right.

Anticoagulation is needed in most people for at least four weeks following the procedure. Antiarrhythmic drugs may also be continued for at least several months after DCCV, if already prescribed beforehand. Routine follow-up assessment may include an ECG and it may be necessary to continue with anticoagulant and antiarrhythmic therapy for the longer term.

If you have any concerns or there have been changes in your situation, you have difficulty with anticoagulant control or palpitations recur, it is important that you seek medical advice as early as possible.

Risks of electrical cardioversion may include the following:

- Onset of bradycardia (slow heart rhythm). This usually passes quickly, or at most, needs an injection with a medicine called atropine, or a short period of pacing (electrical stimulation of the heart to stimulate heartbeats).
- Ventricular tachycardia (fast heart rhythm), treatable with a follow-up shock before the patient regains consciousness.
- Stroke is very unusual if the patient has been fully anticoagulated before the procedure.
- Minor skin burns or irritation from the electrodes — less common these days with the phasing out of metal paddle electrodes.
- Reaction to anaesthetic.
- Up to 20% of people return to AF in a few days.

Internal cardioversion

**Who is it appropriate for?**
People for whom other kinds of CV have failed, or with higher risk or obese patients.

Patients are typically admitted to hospital as a day case. Several routine laboratory tests including blood work and an ECG may be performed before the procedure. On the day, the patient may be asked not to eat or drink anything before the test except for taking sips of water with medication. As in many hospital procedures, you will be asked to sign a consent form to permit the doctor to perform the procedure.

Internal CV uses one or more low energy shock delivered through a special catheter (a thin flexible tube) placed temporarily inside the heart. It is inserted through a vein in the neck or arm and x-rays help the cardiologist to guide it into the heart. Patients will normally have been therapeutically anticoagulated for a period of at least four weeks beforehand.

The whole process takes about 30 minutes and does not usually require a general anaesthetic, although heavy sedation is needed. It is invasive, so it does carry more risk than external CV.

Afterwards, anticoagulation is continued for at least one month, but depending on other factors it may be recommended that anticoagulation continues for longer and this will be decided by your doctor.

It is important to know that none of the CV techniques mentioned is always successful, and further cardioversions may be necessary if AF/atrial flutter returns. If there is still no success, other treatments are available to regulate the heart’s activity.

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