**Death of a partner can have a physical impact on your heart**

By Linda Searing April 11

The death of a loved one often brings on physical and emotional symptoms: trouble sleeping, lack of appetite, anger, guilt and more. Might such deaths affect your heartbeat as well?

This study

Researchers analyzed data on 974,732 adults, including 88,612 people recently diagnosed with atrial fibrillation, the most common type of arrhythmia (irregular heartbeat). During about a 10-year span, 186,418 of the participants experienced the death of a spouse or partner. Those people were more likely than the others to develop atrial fibrillation, an increased risk that lasted for about a year.

In the first month after the death, they were 41 percent more likely to develop the arrhythmia than those whose spouse or partner had not died. People at greatest risk were those younger than 60 who had lost a spouse or partner. They were more than twice as likely as those whose spouse or partner had not died to develop atrial fibrillation.

People who had experienced a loss that was unexpected — because their spouse or partner had been relatively healthy — had a 57 percent higher risk for the arrhythmia than those who had not experienced such loss.

Who may be affected?

The study is especially relevant for people whose spouse or partner dies. Severe, sudden stress brought on by traumatic news has been shown capable of triggering a heart attack, though that is rare. Chronic stress may contribute to heart disease, but most experts believe the ill effects stem mostly from unhealthy ways in which people often react to stress, such as by smoking, drinking or eating poorly, thus raising their risk for heart problems. Less is known about the effects on the heart of the stress associated with grief and mourning.

Caveats

Certain data were not available, including people’s physical activity, lifestyle and family history of atrial fibrillation, and could not be factored into the analysis, which may have affected the results

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April 5 online issue of Open Heart ([openheart.bmj.com](http://openheart.bmj.com/)).

Learn more

Information about coping with grief when a loved one dies can be found at[newsinhealth.nih.gov](https://newsinhealth.nih.gov/) (search for “coping with grief”). Learn about atrial fibrillation at [nhlbi.nih.gov/health](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health).