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Pill-in-the-pocket cardioversion

Patients with atrial fibrillation often ask their doctor whether it might be possible to take a medication only at the time that they get atrial fibrillation, in order to restore the normal rhythm, rather than taking it all the time to ward off attacks which might only occur rarely. In fact it is not unusual for patients to forget to take medication when they have the normal rhythm and when they suddenly develop atrial fibrillation, they then remember to take the medicines and often, do so at a higher dose than normal. This is not recommended without full discussion with the physician to ensure that it can be safely done.

Only some patients are suitable for the 'Pill-in-the-Pocket' method of treatment. They should:

- be able to recognise the onset of the atrial fibrillation
- have attacks that happen no more frequently than at weekly or preferably monthly intervals
- have no significant underlying heart disease
- have no disabling symptoms during an attack (fainting, severe chest pain or breathlessness)
- be able to understand the proper way of taking the medication

The usual way to begin treating a patient in this way is by asking the patient to report to the nearest Accident and Emergency (A&E) Department as soon as possible after the onset of an attack. The patient will have been given a letter to inform the A&E staff about the procedure. A routine 12-lead ECG should be performed to check the rhythm and the general state of the heart. The patient should then be connected to an ECG monitor from which recordings can be taken if needed. The patient will be rested and given the appropriate dose of the antiarrhythmic drug which has been selected for use. This is taken with a small sip of water and the patient then lies down and relaxes, perhaps reading or watching the TV. The staff keep an eye on the situation and the ECG monitor is alarmed to alert the A&E staff of any change of the rhythm. From time to time the blood pressure is taken.

In some cases the technique does not work and the patient is discharged after about four hours, often after being given medication to control the heart rate and with an appointment to see the physician in charge. In most patients the atrial fibrillation does convert to sinus rhythm and the patient is allowed home after an hour of additional ECG monitoring. Provided that the technique was shown to be effective and safe (no abnormal rhythm has developed and the blood pressure has been stable), the patient is then allowed to self administer the same dose of the same medication whenever atrial fibrillation re-occurs. Progress is monitored in the out-patient department and in conjunction with the family physician.

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