



## **Mark McEwen Interview: Get Tested for Afib!**

### **Mike Wong**

Welcome to the Health & Safety Podcast. I am Michael Wong, founder and executive director of the Physician-Patient Alliance for Health & Safety.

Today, I have a very special guest with me, Mark McEwen. Now, many of you may know Mark as a reporter for CBS. However what you might not know is that he has atrial fibrillation, which is a common heart arrhythmia and suffered a stroke, and has gone through extensive rehabilitation.

So, Mark, welcome to the podcast. I'm so glad to have you on!

### **Mark McEwen**

Well, thank you, Mike. Thank you so much. You know, Mike, it's almost like - not a dream - but, a bad nightmare. You don't plan on having a stroke, you don't plan on Afib and here I am! But, you know what, these are the cards I have been dealt. I always say, let's play cards!

### **Mike**

So, when you were told you had Afib, did you think before that you'd been dealt these cards or was it like a shock out of the blue?

### **Mark**

It was more than that, Mike. I didn't know what Afib was. I'd never heard of it before, and all of a sudden, it's an irregular heartbeat in my case and I take medication for it, but it was a surprise to me when the doctor said atrial fibrillation. Again, I never heard of it before. Now, I really know what it is.

### **Mike**

And, so, what would you tell folks, should they be talking to their doctor about it? Obviously, folks who listen to our podcasts are often clinicians, should the doctor be saying to his or her patient, you know, we should get you tested and see whether you have Afib or not? What would you say?

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**Mark**

Mike, my answers are both of those - physicians should say to their patients “you should get tested” and the patient should - awareness is a big thing - be aware of things out there - you should go in and ask your doctor about Afib, about how you can be tested because - it’s an old saying, Mike - it’s better to be safe than sorry.

Afib can be treated, if you know you have it, but if you ignore it, it’s like a dreaded monster - it can creep up on you and change your whole life and, in some cases, you can be gone.

**Mike**

So, what would you say to folks - there's this “it's not going to happen to me” syndrome - it’s going to happen to another guy. I’m ok, but he’s going to get it. We’ve all seen that, we’ve all believed that to some extent. What would you say to folks like that?

**Mark**

You know, Mike, I thought like you just said, bad things always happen to someone else and then one day guess what, my friend, they happened to me. I always say, you rarely if ever hear “lucky” and “stroke” in the same sentence. I've been lucky.

Michael, I was in a coma, I was in intensive care for a week, I was in the hospital for a month, rehab for a year.

I have no idea this was out there and that it would affect me. So, if I have no idea, I'm here to scream from the top of the highest trees, go check it out! It's better to say “no, you don't have to worry about that,” but if you do, again, it's something that can be corrected and you can live with it, but, again, you have to be vigilant about your health. And, Mike, as you get older bugaboos come out of the woodwork.

When I was younger, who cares - chasing girls, dancing at discos, and all that. But, as you get older, I always say the armor that you have around you gets thinner and thinner. You have to help that armor help you. [5:06]

**Mike**

So, during COVID, a lot of folks had their doctors’ appointments cancelled, rescheduled. What's been your experience? Obviously seeing your physician regularly is important. How have you found doing that during this COVID period?

**Mark**

Like everyone else, Mike, I was afraid, scared to see the doctor. I had my medication, I could have it - when it ran out - go to CVS, they would call my physician, fill up my medication, but I had to go in.

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Mike, it's hard for people to go in, but I'll tell you this, doctors' offices might be one of the safest places to go, because they're busy wiping down things - wear your mask, wash your hands, all that - they are on the forefront of being safe.

If you go to, say, Home Depot or you go to Target, it's a bit different than going to your doctor's office. They're more aware of safety when going to the doctor's office. I would tell people "don't be afraid to go into your doctor's office."

**Mike**

And, understandably, folks are afraid. If you don't go out, you're not going to get it, and if I go out and I come back, I could get it or maybe I could pass it on to my other family members that are living with me. Those fears are completely understandable.

You mentioned going to CVS and getting your prescription filled. Adherence rates for folks with chronic illnesses are shockingly only half - 50 percent - which means one out of two folks are taking it, but also one out of two folks are not taking it. How do you remember to make sure you're taking your medication or why do you want to take it continuously?

**Mark**

Well, Michael, having a stroke scared me. I wouldn't wish stroke on my worst enemy. It's like being stuck in a block of ice - your brain can handle things, but it's hard to speak, it's hard to move, it changes everything. So, it's been awhile since I've had my stroke, but I very rarely forget to take my medication, because you have to be on guard, you have to be - I used the word earlier - you have to be vigilant.

So, I have that case where it says "Monday," "Tuesday," "Wednesday," "Thursday" where I put all of my pills. So, every morning I make sure I take all my pills. And, with my blood thinner, I have to take it twice a day, so I have a smaller "Monday," "Tuesday," "Wednesday," "Thursday" right next to my bed, so after dinner I take the other pill for my Afib.

There's a couple of things you can't forget - you can't forget your anniversary, you can't forget your wife's birthday.

**Mike**

Not if you want to stay married for long.

**Mark**

Exactly! Exactly! And, you can't forget your medication, you can't do that. You can forget what day it is, you can forget to take the dog out, but try hard not to forget your medication.

**Mike**

Now, we all get complacent or you just forget - you forget to take it yesterday and you're still alive today. It's that sort of complacency that can be difficult and understandable.

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**Mark**

I agree but again you're dealing with your health, you're dealing with your longevity, you're dealing with being safe. So, again, you can forget what day it is, you can forget to bring your car in from the curb to the driveway, you can forget all that, but you can't forget your medication and, if you do forget just today, don't forget tomorrow.

**Mike**

So, what would you say to folks, how vigilant should they be? What would you warn them about?

**Mark**

Mike, I don't know what happens if you forget your blood thinner for three, four, five days because I've never been there, I've never been there. The most I've ever forgotten is not taking a pill in the morning but maybe at night I sit up and go "no, I forgot" and I run. But, my advice would be to be part of the solution. Be part of the solution, because you don't want your forgetfulness to be part of the problem.

**Mike**

So, it sounds like there are two messages you'd give to folks - (1) get tested to make sure you either do or you don't have it or do have it and (2) if you do have it, make sure you're following your doctor's orders and take your medication as he or she tells you to. Try not to forget - we are all forgetful and it happens.

**Mark**

Mike, I'll go a step further - if you smoke, stop! - smoking is bad for you. If you're heavy, obese - it's hard to lose weight and I ain't going to lie to you, it's hard to that and exercise does not mean joining the gym, go for a walk. Last time I went walking, walking is free - and you don't have to walk ten miles. You can start walking to the end of your driveway and then walk to the end of the street. Then, walk around the block.

I have a dog, Lola, who I say - she loves to go on walks - I saved her life and she saves mine, because I go with her.

Mike, being a stroke survivor, I can't run like I used to, but I can walk. And, you have to be aware to be healthy, to make the odds work in your favor.

**Mike**

That's great advice, Mark! So, thanks so much for being on this podcast and hopefully folks will heed your advice and either get tested or if you're a clinician or doctor, make sure your patients get tested, because obviously Afib is something which most folks don't know about, you didn't know about it all.

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**Mark**

No, I didn't, but never forget because I said it before - it can be controlled. You can lessen the impact of it. Mike, you know, nothing is a sure thing, but if you have a blood thinner and you are kind of combating Afib, you can make the odds work in your favor.

**Mike**

Great advice, Mark. Yeah it's playing those odds and making sure the odds are working in your favor as you've said.

Thank you so much for joining Mark McEwen and I on this podcast. Please subscribe to the Health & Safety Podcasts and join us on our next podcast. In the meantime, take care of your health - get tested for Afib and don't forget to take your medications as prescribed - and take care!

See you next time!