Atrial fibrillation (an irregular and often rapid heart rate resulting in poor blood flow) is the most common abnormal heart rhythm. According to the American Heart Association, AFib can lead to blood clots, stroke, heart failure, and other heart complications. Currently, an estimated 2.7 million Americans are affected by AFib. AFib can affect anyone, but typically people are at a higher risk if they are older adults, have a family history of AFib, have high blood pressure, are obese, or have underlying heart disease.

A recent study [1] published in the Journal of the American Heart Association links exercise to a reduced risk of developing AFib in postmenopausal women and obese women. Dr. Marco Perez, MD and colleagues analyzed data from an observational Women’s Health Initiative study including more than 80,000 women between the ages of 50 and 79 who were not previously diagnosed with AFib. The researchers had the women record the hours of average physical activity (walking outside for more than 10 minutes without stopping) as well as strenuous activity (aerobics, dancing, jogging, tennis, etc.) they participated in per week.

After about 12 years follow-up, almost 10,000 participants developed new-onset AFib. After adjusting for variables including physical activity, researchers reported that higher BMI was independently linked to an increased risk for AFIB. Dr. Perez and his team also reported that each increase in physical activity level was associated with a lower risk of AFib. The most physically active women had a 10% reduced risk of developing AFib. The group at the highest risk for developing AFib included obese, sedentary women.

Although there are concerns about strenuous activity being linked to an increased risk for AFib (athletes are often at a higher risk for developing AFib), Dr. Perez believes these concerns may not apply to postmenopausal women and obese women.

ACSH’s Dr. Gil Ross commented, There’s no question that exercise is linked to several reduced health risks in the older population. This study shows that AFib is just another cardiovascular disorder that can possibly be guarded against by adding a few hours of exercise to your weekly
routine.