

**Splurge** - Volume 7 Issue 10 (October 2012)

Article by: Joseph P. Galichia, MD, FACC

Interventional Cardiologist

Galichia Medical Group, PA

316-684-3838 / 800-657-7250

[www.galichia.com](http://www.galichia.com)

## **PAROXYSMAL SUPRAVENTRICULAR TACHYCARDIA (PSVT)**

As a longtime tennis fan, I'm always excited to watch New York's U.S. Open every year. The drama, the athleticism and the joy of it all is compelling. It's especially exciting to cheer on American players competing in our U.S. Grand Slam Tournament.

One of the up-and-coming American talents, Mardy Fish, caused another kind of stir this year when he chose to pull out of the tournament in the 4<sup>th</sup> round, right before he was scheduled to play number one seed Roger Federer. At age 30, Mardy is one of the most accomplished U.S. players on the profession tour. He also has a history of heart problems.

Mardy Fish revealed that he has a condition called paroxysmal supraventricular tachycardia (PSVT). PSVT is a condition that causes episodes of rapid heartbeat ('paroxysmal' means from time to time); thus, it is a rhythm problem, as opposed to many other cardiac problems that have to do with atherosclerosis or disease.

PSVT occurs most often in infants and young adults. Most often the episodes begin in a person's early twenties. The symptoms can stop and start rapidly, lasting a few minutes, a few hours, and can be mistaken for panic attacks or other events. Symptoms most often include anxiety, rapid pulse, shortness of breath, feeling of tightness or pressure in the chest, dizziness, fainting and/or palpitations (sense of feeling the heartbeat.)

Though PSVT is often genetic, physicians suggest patients with this diagnosis avoid alcohol, caffeine, smoking and illicit drugs – especially those that accelerate cardiac activity. The heart rate may increase to over 100 and even 250 beats per minute when in an episode. In between, however, a patient's heart rate will be normal (60-100 beats per minute.)

Doctors have a few tests to make this diagnosis. Most commonly, an EKG administered during an episode of PSVT will show the basic rhythm abnormality. The next line of diagnostic testing would be a more accurate test called an electrophysiology study (EPS). Because of the on and off nature of PSVT, a physician might order a Holter monitor test. A Holter monitor is a portable ECG used to detect cardiac rhythm problems.

PSVT is rarely life-threatening, but sudden death is also not uncommon, especially with a heart rate of 150 and over. Ways that you can stop an attack of PSVT are:

1. Put pressure over your carotid artery (an artery in your neck) at the angle of the jaw for 3-6 seconds
2. Take a deep breath, hold it and strain for 3-6 seconds

Both actions send nerve signals to the heart to slow the electrical signal enough to bring the heart rate back to normal. Your doctor can show you the techniques and will be able to assess if other interventions are necessary (i.e., medications, cardiac ablation, etc.)

If the attacks are frequent or prolonged, there is a danger of the heart becoming weak. A weak heart doesn't pump as well as it should. Please follow treatment guidelines recommended by your cardiologist and / or electrophysiologist. If you have an episode that fails to subside after 15 minutes or so, call your doctor. If you faint or experience severe weakness, call 911. Patients with PSVT should maintain a healthy diet, regularly exercise and avoid smoking.

As evidenced by the athletic accomplishments of Mardy Fish, PSVT may slow you down a bit, but there is no reason to think that one cannot succeed at high levels – athletically, academically and otherwise. Mardy Fish was prudent in protecting his health by withdrawing from the U.S. Open, but my guess is that this isn't the last we'll see of this extraordinary tennis player. If anything, let's view his situation as one of triumph and self-care; one we can all manifest in our own ways.

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