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Heart to Heart to Heart



Eric, Michael and Mike Lindberg have all been treated at Cleveland Clinic by the same physician for the same heart condition.

If hospitals offered friends and family discounts, the Lindberg family would qualify in spades—or make that hearts. Three generations of Lindberg men have received cardiac ablations at Cleveland Clinic, all performed by Oussama Wazni, MD, MBA. As section head for Cardiac Electrophysiology and Pacing at Cleveland Clinic, Dr. Wazni specializes in electrophysiology—and in the health of Mike, Eric and Michael Lindberg.

“It is amazing that I got to treat the three generations,” says Dr. Wazni. “It’s an honor, but it’s also a responsibility.”

Cardiac arrhythmia (abnormal heart rhythm) first affected Mike Lindberg, now 73 and living in Miramar Beach, Florida, when he was flying F-4 fighter jets in the U.S. Marine Corps. “After I left the service, it became more serious,” he says.

Mike soon learned that he had atrial fibrillation (AFib), an irregular heart rhythm that begins in the heart's upper chambers and can cause fatigue, heart palpitations, trouble breathing and dizziness. What he didn't know at the time was that his son, Eric, had a similar condition.

"I had a very normal, healthy, asymptomatic childhood," says Eric, now 49 and a Greenwich, Connecticut, resident. "I didn't have any idea that there was this kind of heart condition brewing inside my body."

That changed during Eric's junior year at the U.S. Air Force Academy, when the chief cardiologist pulled him out of a midterm exam. A routine flight physical had shown damage to his heart that was consistent with idiopathic dilated cardiomyopathy. "I went over to the hospital to talk to him, and he told me I had a 50-50 chance of dying in the next two years."

Eric went on to graduate from the Academy, although his dreams of being a fighter pilot were over. Through his Air Force cardiologist, he was introduced to and sought care from the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center. Cardiologists there placed him into a clinical trial for the drug carvedilol, which quickly started to reverse the weakening of his heart function. Later into his 20s, he also began experiencing mild arrhythmia and pre-ventricular contractions.

With a family link to arrhythmia becoming obvious, Mike and Eric's local cardiologist in Connecticut, suggested that they travel to Yale University for a genetic study, which concluded they were almost genetic "carbon copies."

In fact, the two share an anomaly on the TTN gene—as does Eric's son Michael—that increases the odds for AFib and ventricular tachycardia (VT) to occur. "It causes certain changes in the structure of the heart and causes a tendency towards arrhythmia," Mike says.

Armed with that knowledge, and at the suggestion of a cardiologist at the University of Colorado, Mike consulted with Dr. Wazni, who suggested ablation to treat his AFib.

"With AFib, we ablate around the pulmonary veins; in most patients, they are the ones that trigger AFib," Dr. Wazni says. "With VT, we ablate the trigger mechanism in the ventricle."

"The first ablation for me lasted seven years before I started experiencing problems again," Mike says. "What they've found is that the tissue where the signal originates starts to regenerate after a period of time. So, I just recently had my third ablation."

Like Father, Like Son

Meanwhile, Eric didn't change his treatment regimen until he went skiing in Colorado at age 40. "That's really where the beast reared its ugly head," he says.

After his youngest son, J.R., had a crash, Eric hiked down the ski run to get J.R.'s gear, hiked back up again and promptly went into cardiac arrest. "From that point on, I started to have pretty intense ventricular and atrial arrhythmia issues," he says.

Eric had one ablation done at Yale Health, but given the unique techniques required to ablate the source of Eric's arrhythmia, cardiologists there recommended he have a second ablation at either Cleveland Clinic or Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston. Cleveland Clinic was the obvious choice, given his dad's treatment, the deep experience of Dr. Wazni and his team, and the outstanding patient service.

Three's Company

It wasn't long before Eric's son, Michael, also began seeing Dr. Wazni. Knowing the family's genetic history, Eric had each of his children tested as they entered puberty. "My brother, sister and I all got tested, and I was the lucky one," Michael jokes.

His first arrhythmia occurred when he felt his heart racing after a high school aquatics class. Soon, he was diagnosed with AFib. "Being a minor with AFib made things 10 times more difficult because there really are not that many adult cardiologists that want to mess with a 16-year-old," he says.

AFib didn't prevent him from graduating or from playing rugby throughout high school ("much to the chagrin of my cardiologist," he jokes). Nor did it prevent him from entering the University of Alabama, where he's a biology major on a pre-med track.

During his freshman year, Michael regularly battled AFib. He changed his medication and then had his first ablation this past summer. Since then, he has noticed dramatic improvement. "I am the healthiest I have been since my diagnosis. Although I am still hyper-aware of my body, I live a normal life."

All three Lindbergs continue to see Dr. Wazni; Mike has also received care from Pasquale Santangeli, MD, PhD, at Cleveland Clinic. Mike and Eric have both supported Cleveland Clinic financially with their respective employers, IBM and U.S. Bank, providing matching contributions.

Following the ablations performed by Dr. Wazni and the Cleveland Clinic team, the Lindbergs are leading full, active lives. Among them, they participate in a range of sports, including golf, skiing, swimming and scuba diving. Mike retired after a successful thirty-year career as an executive at IBM. Eric is an executive at U.S. Bank and Michael is enjoying his time in college before heading to medical school.

"With other management, including medications and having a defibrillator where indicated, they can live very healthy lives," Dr. Wazni says. "We don't put any restrictions on them."

"My grandpa served in the Marines. My dad graduated from the Air Force Academy and is still healthy. I played sports all my life, and I'm in a field of study that requires high intensity," Michael says. "This ailment is not debilitating for any of us. It's something that we have to work through, but it's not the end all be all."

In short, the Lindbergs are linked by arrhythmia, but they're not defined by it.