I am under the impression that stress makes my heart beat irregularly. My wife says I am a natural-born “worrywart,” but can stress hurt my heart?

Stress is more of an internal reaction than a quantifiable external event. So your wife may have a point. People who have a greater level of anxiety are more stressed than others, and you may live in a state of anxiety. Such people are prone to panic attacks, but episodic stress can produce changes in the cardiovascular dynamics.

Evidence exists that atrial fibrillation can be triggered by stress, though there is probably an underlying problem. Ventricular fibrillation, which is much more serious, can also be triggered by acute distress. Myocardial ischemia, or reduced coronary blood flow, also can occur in response to stress. A condition in which multiple extra beats of the heart occur may also be a response to stress.

It is important for you to learn relaxation techniques and to analyze the cause of your stress and your reaction to events. Professional help can give good insights. Your doctor may consider giving you medication to dampen the effects of adrenalin-like compounds. These medications, called B-blockers, may not only bring a sense of relief from stress but actually reduce the response of your heart to your distress—especially when you are in an acutely stressful situation.

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While this column is provided as a service to our readers, Drs. Landless and Handysides unfortunately cannot enter into personal and private communication with our readers. We recommend that you consult with your personal physician on all matters of your health.