

Don't let stroke be your first warning: New smartphone app to check for irregular heartbeat

A leading heart health organisation is urging Australians not to forgo testing for an irregular heartbeat because of COVID-19 restrictions and distancing measures.

Around half a million Australians live with atrial fibrillation (AF)¹, where the heart's rhythm is irregular, putting them at five-fold higher risk of a life-threatening stroke.^{2,3}

As part of Atrial Fibrillation Awareness Week 2020 (21-27 September), Hearts4Heart is launching a new smartphone application, [Feel The Beat](#), to put a free heart rate check at the fingertips of at-risk Australians.

Hearts4Heart CEO Tanya Hall, an AF patient herself, said that in past years the health charity has set up mobile heart rate testing stations in hospitals and pharmacies across the nation to detect suspected cases of atrial fibrillation.

"The pressures of the global pandemic mean that on-site testing isn't possible," she said.

"By creating the app we hope we can raise awareness about the dangers of undetected AF and get people checking their heart rate and speaking to their doctor about an irregular heartbeat."

When undiagnosed and untreated, an irregular heartbeat can cause blood to pool in a chamber of the heart and form a clot that can travel to the brain, causing a devastating stroke.

"Approximately 6,000 atrial fibrillation-related strokes occur each year⁴, but they can be prevented, and diagnosis is the first critical step. We don't want a stroke to be the first time any Australian discovers they have an irregular heartbeat."

Ms Hall says the [Feel The Beat](#) app is free and simple to use. "After a few questions to assess your risk profile it's easy to check your pulse and heart rate by putting your finger over your camera phone lens."

Ms Hall said the quick test predicts the risk of developing atrial fibrillation in the next five years but reiterated that the convenient in-app heart check was no replacement for seeing a doctor.

"People with atrial fibrillation may not experience any obvious symptoms so it's vital to see a doctor regularly for a thorough heart health assessment," she said.

"We know the prevalence of AF increases with age and other risk factors, so people aged over 65 years or with existing heart conditions are encouraged to do routine heart rate checks."

Hearts4Heart is using Atrial Fibrillation Awareness Week to highlight how early diagnosis of an irregular heartbeat can ultimately save lives. More information is available at:

www.hearts4heart.org.au

For interviews, please contact Tanya Hall from Hearts4Heart on 0426 240 636

References

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2. Ball J, Thompson DR, Ski CF et al. Estimating the current and future prevalence of atrial fibrillation in the Australian adult population. Med J Aust 2015; 202:32–35.
3. Kirchhof P, Benussi S, Kotecha D, et al. 2016 ESC Guidelines for the management of atrial fibrillation developed in collaboration with EACTS. Eur Heart J 2016; 37: 2893–62.
4. PricewaterhouseCoopers. Update: The economic cost of atrial fibrillation in Australia. 2017.

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ABOUT ATRIAL FIBRILLATION

If you have atrial fibrillation, you are not alone. This heart condition affects almost half a million Australians.

Atrial fibrillation is the medical name for a type of irregular heartbeat. Your doctor may call it ‘AF’ or ‘AFib’ for short or refer to it as a heart rhythm disturbance or an arrhythmia.

Atrial fibrillation occurs when there is a disturbance in the heart’s electrical system. This causes the upper chambers of the heart (the atria) to quiver or wobble and beat out of rhythm with the rest of the heart.

Many people with atrial fibrillation have no symptoms, but others experience a racing heart, thumping or butterfly sensations in the heart and chest, chest pain or discomfort, fatigue, tiredness, loss of breath, or dizziness.

This means that the heart does not work as well as it should, and blood is not pumped properly through the body. This can strain and weaken the heart and, over time, cause heart failure.

Risk Factors for heart rhythm problems	Symptoms you need to watch
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Physical inactivity• Being overweight• Disrupted sleep• Having diabetes• Smoking• High cholesterol• High blood pressure• Age over 65	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Dizziness• Palpitations• Shortness of breath• Fainting• Ankle swelling• Chest pain

READ MORE ABOUT ATRIAL FIBRILLATION AT:

<http://www.hearts4heart.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/AF-Explained-Brochure.pdf>