

Exposure to COVID-19 may increase risk of serious heart condition

- *According to research, people who have had even mild cases of COVID-19 are at increased risk of developing atrial fibrillation (AF).*
- *In 2021, there was a 4% increase in the prevalence of atrial fibrillation among hospitalised COVID-19 patients in Australia.*
- *More than half a million Australians are affected by atrial fibrillation, a condition that is responsible for 1-in-4 strokes and increases risk of heart failure and dementia.*
- *Alarmingly, up to 1-in-3 people living with the condition remain undiagnosed.*

13 September 2022, Sydney, Australia:

This Atrial Fibrillation Awareness Week (September 19 - September 25), leading heart health charity hearts4heart is urging Australians to get their heart checked, following reports that people who have had COVID-19 are at greater risk of developing atrial fibrillation (AF).

Around half a million Australians currently live with atrial fibrillation,¹ and prevalence is expected to double in the next decade.⁸

The serious heart condition results in an irregular and often very rapid heart rhythm (arrhythmia) that can lead to blood clots in the heart.

It is associated with a three-fold increase in the risk of heart failure^{2,4} and a five to seven-fold increase in the risk of life-threatening stroke.^{2,3}

According to a new report published in Nature,⁶ patients who had COVID-19 are 1.19 times more likely to develop atrial fibrillation compared to patients who hadn't had COVID-19. This was consistent even among patients who were not hospitalised or had only a mild case of COVID-19.⁶

The study highlights the adverse effects of COVID-19, warranting physicians to check for potential cardiac arrhythmias among patients.

"Australians need to be heart smart now more than ever and have their finger on the pulse," said cardiologist and hearts4heart Medical Director Professor John Amerena.

"Don't put your heart health on hold. Learn to recognise atrial fibrillation symptoms, test for an irregular heartbeat, and speak with your GP about getting your heart checked. It may save your life, Professor Amarena said.

Affecting one-in-twenty Australians aged 55 and over, atrial fibrillation is often considered a condition that only occurs in older people, but it can affect people of all ages.

Highlighting the importance of early detection to reduce the risk of stroke and improve patient outcomes, Atrial Fibrillation Awareness Week was first launched eight years ago by leading charity hearts4heart to increase awareness about AF prevention, symptoms, diagnosis, and complications.

"Not everyone experiences symptoms, and the most common ones are often dismissed, either as other health issues or just signs of getting older, but they shouldn't be ignored," said Hearts4heart founder and CEO, Tanya Hall.

“If you’ve experienced a rapid heartbeat or palpitations, dizziness, unexplained tiredness, shortness of breath, fainting, swelling of the ankles or chest pain, speak with your GP about getting your heart checked,” Ms Hall said.

“Many people living with atrial fibrillation don’t experience symptoms, which means you could be living with an underlying heart condition and not know it,” said Ms Hall, who was born with a hole in her heart and had her first operation at nine years old.

For some children born with the condition, the hole can close on its own, but Ms Hall’s continued to get bigger. As she approached her 20s and early 30s, things worsened. She had several arrhythmia problems and was in and out of hospital for three years.

During that time, Ms Hall looked for information and support to help her manage her heart conditions but soon realised there wasn’t anything available. Instead of giving up, she started her own patient support organisation, hearts4heart.

“Initially, it was to share information that I had learned along the way but also to provide peer support to patients. Today we’re a national organisation and have expanded to include New Zealand.”

Hearts4Heart now provides peer support services and individual risk assessments (in partnership with hospitals and pharmacies across Australia), in addition to raising awareness through national campaigns and other events. Ms Hall and her team also advocate for better access to therapies and are regularly involved in government health policy reviews.

To find out more about atrial fibrillation, visit hearts4heart.org.au.

For further information or to arrange an interview with hearts4heart CEO Tanya Hall, a medical expert, or a case study, please contact:

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