

Don, 49

Former cosmetic dentist, avid tennis player and father-to-three alerted to symptoms of atrial fibrillation via a smartwatch, ***GOLD COAST***

Retired cosmetic dentist to the stars, keen tennis player and father-to-three girls, Don, 49, Gold Coast, was diagnosed with atrial fibrillation (AF) – a common type of heart arrhythmia – in February 2022.

AF is a chronic, progressive disease caused by poor atrial contraction (heart pumping),¹ involving an irregular and often rapid heartbeat.²⁻⁴ The incidence of asymptomatic (showing no symptoms) AF is between 30 and 40 per cent.⁵

One Saturday morning in February 2022, while feeling unwell, Don chose to try on his friend's smartwatch. The watch alerted him to an irregular heart rhythm, displaying an 'emergency' message, which unfortunately, Don chose to dismiss.



A few days later, curious about the accuracy of the smartwatch, Don visited his local GP, who urgently referred him to hospital. He was subsequently diagnosed with AF and hospitalised for two weeks. During this period his heart fluctuated between 40 and 200 beats per minute (bpm).

After being discharged from hospital, Don met with a cardiologist, who placed him on a treatment plan that worked well for two years. However, in April 2024, a medical complication caused his health to decline sharply. His AF returned, as he was on the brink of heart failure. Six months later, Don was placed on a new treatment plan, and underwent a life-saving procedure.

Today, Don enjoys a vibrant and active lifestyle. He travels overseas, plays tennis, runs on the beach, cooks and plays the piano. He feels incredibly fortunate that his friend's smartwatch detected his AF before it was potentially too late.

Don has therefore, chosen to share his story, to raise community awareness and understanding of living with symptoms of AF, and to urge those affected by the disease, to prioritise their heart health.

This is Don's story.

As a cosmetic dentist, and a keen sportsman, Don has always led a fit and healthy lifestyle.

However, it was his friend's smartwatch that first alerted him to an 'emergency' with his heart in February 2022.

"I was feeling a little unwell one day, so tried on my friend's smartwatch, and did an electrocardiogram (ECG) – [which measures the electrical activity of the heart].⁶

"The watch alerted me to seek urgent medical care. My initial thought was, 'The watch must be wrong,'" said Don.

"However, sensing something wasn't quite right, and being naturally inquisitive, I thought it would be best to visit my GP."

Don's GP consequently examined his chest and immediately referred him to a nearby hospital.

"It wasn't until I saw the doctors and nurses genuinely concerned for my wellbeing in hospital, that I realised something was seriously wrong.

"I felt shocked and anxious, as my heart continued to fluctuate between 40 and 200 bpm," Don said.

"Up until then, I honestly had no idea this was indicative of AF."

Don was treated for his AF over the next two years. However, in April 2024, a medical complication triggered the return of his AF, which, on this occasion, left him housebound and unable to exercise for two months.

Later that year, in November 2024, while once again heading into heart failure, Don underwent an AF medical procedure.

"My heart responded well to the procedure. My electrophysiologist effectively saved my life," said Don.

Today, Don is able to reflect on the challenges he experienced while living with AF.

"AF completely compromised my life. I had to sell my cosmetic dentistry practice and retire.

"I felt extremely anxious and cautious all the time, and was restricted as to where I could go," Don said.

"I could no longer enjoy exercise, a cup of coffee or glass of wine. Travel was also out of the question.

"My daughters were constantly concerned for my welfare. It was stressful for everyone," said Don.

Today, Don has some important advice for Australians living with symptoms of AF.

"If you're feeling unsettled, stressed, or anxious, and notice your heart racing, or if you're experiencing palpitations, speak to your GP for guidance and support.

"It could literally save your life," Don said.

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Individual symptoms, situations, circumstances and results may vary. This information is not intended to be used for medical diagnosis or treatment or as a substitute for professional medical advice. Please consult your doctor or qualified healthcare provider regarding your condition and appropriate medical treatment.

References

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