

## Justine, 54

Mum-of-two, grandmother-to-eight, publisher, author, artist, coach and consultant who lived with atrial fibrillation, **GEELONG**

Award-winning international keynote speaker, 'mumpreneur', Olympic weightlifter, mother-to-two, and grandmother-to-seven, Justine, 54, Geelong, was diagnosed with atrial fibrillation (AF) – a common type of heart arrhythmia – in September 2012.

After experiencing a series of agonising headaches, Justine was rushed to hospital emergency, where doctors assessed her resting heart rate at 165 beats per minute (BPM).

With no known family history of AF, Justine had mistakenly attributed her abnormal chest flutters, tiredness and dizziness – all common AF symptoms – to a multiple sclerosis diagnosis, 15 months prior.

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



After undergoing initial treatment and surgery to control her AF symptoms in October 2013, 11 weeks later, Justine's resting heart rate spiked to 217 BPM. Unsure if she was "going to wake up in the morning", Justine subsequently lost feeling in her right arm as well as her hearing.

Using medication to reduce her heart rate, Justine waited four weeks until her cardiologist was available to perform another round of surgery. This time, she developed premature atrial contractions (PAC) – early heart beats originating from the heart's upper chambers<sup>5</sup> – while a subsequent third surgery left her with pericarditis (inflammation of the heart lining).<sup>6</sup>

Justine's cardiologists contacted her family in 2015, concerned about her severely weakened heart. After doctors prescribed antibiotics, it took seven weeks for her to start feeling normal again.

In 2016, Justine was diagnosed with three major cancers, revealing the cause of her irregular heartbeat.

Today, Justine has chosen to share her story, to raise community awareness and understanding of AF, and to urge those affected, to prioritise their health.

**This is Justine's story.**

Justine first experienced symptoms of tiredness, dizziness and chest flutters in 2012, which she then attributed to her MS diagnosis in 2011. She struggled to perform daily tasks, walk up stairs, or sit up from lying down, and felt generally unwell.

"I was shocked to receive a diagnosis of AF. I thought the disease only affected older people.

"I just never thought anything would go wrong with my heart," said Justine.

Around 15 months later, her symptoms intensified and led to a series of debilitating headaches one day, which resulted in her admission to the hospital emergency department.

"The pain felt like a dagger in the centre of my brain. I've never felt such excruciating pain in all my life.

"I was put on an electrocardiogram (ECG) machine. My resting heart rate was 165 BPM," Justine said.

"When the doctor asked me whether this had happened a lot, I explained I had experienced chest flutters for the past 15 months.

"I was in and out of AF all day, up to 100 times a day. It affected my sleep as I could hear my heart rate, and I had to stop going to music concerts because of my pounding chest," said Justine.

That week, Justine was referred to a cardiologist who prescribed medication. She was then referred to an electrophysiologist, who performed a pulmonary vein isolation ablation (a procedure that blocks the electric signals that cause AF).<sup>7</sup>

However, her symptoms returned.

"I saw the artery in my neck pulsating.

"I didn't know if I was going to wake up in the morning," Justine said.

Justine lost all feeling in her right arm and was unable to hear.

While waiting the ensuing four weeks for her cardiologist to perform surgery, Justine "faced mortality."

"I was very, very scared," said Justine.

12 months later, Justine was diagnosed with three major cancers, representing the root cause of her AF.

Justine reflected on the challenges of living with AF.

"It was terrifying to live with AF. You just don't know if, or when you're going to have a blood clot."

After enduring various treatments and multiple surgeries, Justine is nowadays, "much more aware" of her heart, and no longer takes it for granted.

She has important advice for Australians at risk of developing AF.

"It's important to listen to doctors, and if in doubt, seek a second or third opinion.

"Don't assume because you have one disease, you may not have another.

"If you're experiencing AF symptoms, make sure you see your doctor without delay," Justine said.

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**To coordinate an interview with Justine, please contact:**

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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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