

SA MEDIA RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE USE

Almost one in three South Australians with an irregular heartbeat experience four or more symptoms before visiting a doctor: new research shows

Experts championing greater heart health awareness, education and action

Almost one in three (30%) South Australians aged 50 and above living with the most common, sustained heart rhythm disorder – atrial fibrillation (AF)¹⁻³ – wait until experiencing four or more symptoms before seeking medical advice, new research reveals.⁴

More than half a million Australians (>34,000 South Australians) have AF⁵ – a lifelong, progressive disease⁶ where faulty electrical signals of the heart cause the top chambers of the heart known as the atria, to beat faster, erratically,^{7,8} and out of rhythm with the heart's lower two chambers, the ventricles.³ Other AF symptoms include chest tightness, fatigue, shortness of breath and dizziness,^{6,9} noting 30% to 40% of those affected may show no symptoms at all.¹⁰

According to Cardiologist and Electrophysiologist, Queensland Cardiovascular Group, Dr Tomos Walters, Brisbane, the burden and prevalence of this serious, life-compromising disease^{4,11} is often underestimated because many (30% - 40%) may not display visible symptoms, which makes diagnosis challenging.¹

"While many Australian adults claim to understand various factors affecting their heart health,⁴ concerningly, the new research reveals 34% wait until experiencing four or more AF symptoms before seeking medical advice.⁴

"The underestimation of disease prevalence,¹ combined with low community awareness,⁴ and 30% to 40% of patients showing no obvious AF symptoms,¹⁰ is creating the "perfect storm" for one of the largest, and most pressing public health epidemics,"¹²⁻¹⁴ said Dr Walters.

"Furthermore, AF cases in those aged 55 and above are projected to double over the next two decades,¹ driven by our ageing population and rising rates of excess weight and obesity.¹⁰

"People living with AF face a threefold increased risk of heart failure, nearly five times the likelihood of having a stroke, and double the risk of developing dementia,"^{10,15} Dr Walters said.

"Early diagnosis and intervention is therefore crucial for effective management,¹⁶ and reducing the risk of these potentially life-threatening complications."^{10,15}

The new research reveals one in three (32%) South Australians living with AF report a 'moderate to severe' decline in their quality of life and, ability to perform daily activities.⁴

Moreover, only 24% of South Australians feel motivated to pursue a more proactive approach to their heart health, even after learning about the heightened risk of stroke, underscoring the urgent need for greater community education and awareness of AF.⁴

"More than three-quarters (77%) of Australians living with AF, or its symptoms, report feeling 'anxious' or 'worried', with 13% experiencing 'severe' anxiety due to the chronic disease,"⁴ said AF subject expert and CEO of Heart Support Australia, Dr Christian Verdicchio, Adelaide.

"Studies show depression or anxiety can worsen AF symptoms, reduce quality of life, and increase the likelihood of AF recurrence."¹⁷

"Mental and emotional stress can affect the heart, with studies suggesting anxiety may trigger heart arrhythmias (irregular heartbeats) like AF.¹⁸ This highlights the need for improved disease awareness and a more proactive approach to detection and diagnosis," Dr Verdicchio said.

"While physical inactivity is also a known risk factor for AF, the new research reveals nearly 72% of those living with the disease report it affects their ability to stay active,⁴ which may make the problem worse.

"It is crucial for all Australians aged 50 and above to stay active. Regular physical activity and exercise has shown to significantly reduce the burden of AF and symptoms, along with improving one's general quality of life and other health problems."¹⁹⁻²¹ said Dr Verdicchio.

"It is completely safe to exercise if you do have AF, and guidelines now promote it as a therapy in conjunction with risk factor management^{1,22} as we now know AF is very much a lifestyle disease."²³

"Doing some form of exercise every day can significantly improve your health outcomes and can not only reduce your AF, but also improve your likelihood of living longer,"²⁴ Dr Verdicchio said.

Despite many Australians regularly monitoring their heart health⁴ – through blood pressure checks (58%), electrocardiograms (41%), and heart auscultations [listening for an abnormal heart beat] (34%)⁴ – one in three (31%) still feel unsure about recognising heart-related symptoms and when to seek medical advice.⁴

CEO and Founder of the national heart disease advocacy group, [hearts4heart](#), Tanya Hall, Perth, said her personal experience with AF inspired her to create an organisation dedicated to raising awareness of the disease, and ensuring patients are educated about available treatments.

"Living with AF took a significant toll on my life. It affected my ability to work, socialise, and my mental health.

"With timely diagnosis, supportive networks, and the right treatment however, I've been able to live well with AF, and lead a fulfilling life," said Tanya.

"However, awareness of AF remains alarmingly low among the general population, including the elderly, despite one in 10 (9%) of those aged 80 and above living with the disease."¹⁰

"When most people think of heart disease, they think of a 'heart attack', but many are unaware of other heart conditions.

"This reinforces the urgent need for increased awareness, better patient education, and a proactive approach to heart health," Tanya said.

Mother to one, housekeeper and motorbike enthusiast, Kristy, 44, Gawler, South Australia, first experienced symptoms of AF during childbirth. At the time she was 36 years old, active and in good health, with little to no warning signs leading up to what should have been a routine hospital admission for the birth of her daughter.

"Going into labour triggered my AF symptoms. My heart rate was erratic, I was freezing one moment, then overheating and vomiting the next.

"While in labour, I underwent an electrocardiogram (ECG), which revealed my heart rate had surged to 210 beats per minute," said Kristy.

"I have no known family history of heart issues, and had never experienced any heart problems before. It was shocking, confronting and confusing, to say the least. I knew nothing about AF.

"Living with AF, and the uncertainty of when the next episode would occur was difficult. I was constantly in and out of hospital and had to carry medication with me all the time," Kristy said.

Today, Kristy is urging others to be vigilant and not ignore early warning signs.

"If something doesn't feel right, don't ignore it. Get the help you need sooner rather than later.

"Most importantly, don't take your health for granted. Always be proactive about medical check-ups, because things don't always go as expected," said Kristy.

To learn more about the symptoms, management and treatment of AF, visit your doctor, or head to: www.beatafib.com.au.

About Antenna market research

Boston Scientific commissioned Antenna to perform an online, quantitative survey on atrial fibrillation (AF), involving a nationally representative sample of 1,015 Australians aged 50+ years between January 7 to 12, 2025.¹ The data was weighted by age and gender to reflect the 2021 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) population estimates.

Boston Scientific Pty Ltd, PO Box 332 Botany NSW 1455 Australia. Tel +61 2 8063 8100.

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AVAILABLE FOR INTERVIEW

EXPERTS	
Dr Christian Verdicchio	CEO, Heart Support Australia, Clinician-researcher & Clinical Senior Lecturer, University of Sydney & University of Adelaide, ADELAIDE
Dr Tomos Walters	Cardiologist and Cardiac Electrophysiologist, Queensland Cardiovascular Group, BRISBANE
Dr Ben Hunt	Cardiologist and Cardiac Electrophysiologist, Pindara Private Hospital, GOLD COAST
A/Prof Raymond Sy	Cardiologist; Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, Concord Hospital, and Mater Hospital; Director of Arrhythmia Service; and Clinical Associate Professor, University of Sydney, SYDNEY
Dr Ihab El-Sokkari	Director of Cardiac Electrophysiology Services, Cardiologist and Cardiac Electrophysiologist, Nepean Public and Private Hospitals and Clinical Senior Lecturer, University of Sydney, SYDNEY
Dr Emily Kotschet	Cardiologist and Cardiac Electrophysiologist, Monash Heart, Holmesglen Private Hospital, Cabrini Hospital, Mulgrave Private Hospital and St John of God Berwick Hospital, MELBOURNE
Dr Ben King	Specialist Cardiologist and Cardiac Electrophysiologist; Clinical Lead of the Ventricular Tachycardia Service, Fiona Stanley Hospital; and Senior Lecturer, University of Western Australia, PERTH
PATIENT ADVOCACY GROUP REPRESENTATIVE	
Tanya Hall	Founder and CEO of hearts4heart living well with AF, PERTH
AUSTRALIANS WITH EXPERIENCE OF AF	
Kristy, 44	Mother to one, housekeeper and motorbike enthusiast who first experienced symptoms of AF during labour, GAWLER, SA
Justine, 53	Triple cancer survivor, Multiple Sclerosis advocate, award-winning international keynote speaker, mother and grandmother living with AF, GEELONG
Tom, 78	Former real estate agent, father and grandfather living with AF, MELBOURNE
Gai, 72	Retired pharmacist and business owner, mother and grandmother living with AF, MELBOURNE
Andrew, 59	Business owner, soccer player and stepfather to two whose AF symptoms were triggered by emotional trauma, SYDNEY
Gregory, 59	Water quality technician, father of two, and car enthusiast diagnosed with AF following a workplace accident, BATHURST
Graeme, 55	Father-of-two, government infrastructure executive and avid outdoorsman, alerted to symptoms of AF by his smartwatch, BRISBANE
Elaine, 81	Avid gardener and former seamstress alerted to symptoms of AF via her smartwatch, BRISBANE
Don, 49	Former cosmetic dentist, avid tennis player and father-to-three alerted to symptoms of AF via a smartwatch, GOLD COAST
Tanya Hall	Founder and CEO of hearts4heart living well with AF, PERTH

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MEDIA CONTACTS	Kirsten Bruce & Mel Kheradi, VIVA! Communications T 02 9968 3741 1604 M 0401 717 566 0421 551 257 E kirstenbruce@vivacommunications.com.au mel@vivacommunications.com.au

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