

Graeme, 55

Father-of-two, government infrastructure executive and sportsman warned of atrial fibrillation symptoms by his smartwatch, **BRISBANE**

Father-of-two, government infrastructure executive, keen cyclist, tennis player and hiker, Graeme, 55, Brisbane discovered he was living with atrial fibrillation (AF) – a common type of heart arrhythmia¹ – after his smartwatch alerted him to an irregular heartbeat in December 2023.

While on holiday with his wife in Ireland, Graeme was jolted awake in the middle of the night by a pounding sensation in his chest. Alarmed, he reached for his smartwatch, which displayed a warning: an irregular heart rate – a possible sign of AF.

Although Graeme had only mild shortness of breath and no prior symptoms, his smartwatch alert led him to hospital emergency, where he was diagnosed with AF. He was prescribed medication, and his condition stabilised within four days.

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

Already alarmed, Graeme grew increasingly anxious due to a congenital heart defect diagnosed in his mid-20s, fearing major surgery may be necessary.

After managing his AF effectively with medication for the ensuing 12 months, Graeme underwent six-hour-long open-heart surgery in February 2025 to repair a mitral valve, close a hole in his heart, as well as an ablation to treat his AF. He experienced four weeks of AF post-surgery, and ultimately underwent a cardioversion - a procedure used to restore a normal heart rhythm by delivering a controlled electrical shock to the heart to reset his heart rhythm.

Just three months post-surgery, Graeme is starting to feel like himself again, although his shortness of breath persists. A full recovery is expected to take several months.

Graeme has chosen to share his story to raise community awareness about AF.

This is his story.

A sudden and unsettling episode overseas was the first indication something was seriously wrong for Graeme.

"I was in Ireland when I suddenly woke up in the middle of the night with my heart pounding. It was unlike anything I'd ever felt before.

"I put on my smartwatch and it showed an erratic heart rate.

"I woke my wife up, and she googled 'rapid heart rate', which flagged the gravity of the situation I found myself in and prompted the immediate journey to the emergency department at the local hospital to discover what was going on," said Graeme.

Graeme was subsequently diagnosed with AF and treated.



"Within hours of experiencing symptoms, I was diagnosed and prescribed medication. Within four days, everything had settled down — it was a swift and effective response."

Graeme's initial reaction was fear, which was further intensified by his existing heart condition.

"I was quite alarmed and anxious about the potential implications for my overall health and wellbeing, particularly as this happened on day two of our holiday".

"I've lived with a congenital heart condition since my mid-20s, so the possibility of needing major surgery made the situation feel far more serious," Graeme said.

Graeme initially controlled his condition with medication, but over time, it became clear surgery was unavoidable.

"At first, it was very manageable. I took tablets, which worked well. My heart rhythm returned to normal, and everything felt under control.

"However, upon returning to Australia, my cardiologist initiated a series of diagnostic tests, and it quickly became clear that my heart was under strain and surgery would be necessary.

"In February 2025, I underwent a six-hour open-heart operation to repair and strengthen my mitral valve, close a hole in the wall between my atria, and perform an ablation to treat the AF," said Graeme.

Graeme experienced some post-surgery complications, but prompt treatment helped him recover.

"When I got home, I was not well due to inflammation in my heart and lungs. But medication took care of that.

"I also had to go back to hospital for a cardioversion to reset my heart rhythm," said Graeme.

"Altogether, I had about four weeks of AF after my surgery."

Graeme has since mounted a strong recovery and now has an important message to share with those who may be experiencing symptoms of AF.

"I've learned the importance of following medical advice and staying disciplined about making healthy choices and lifestyle changes of relevance to my condition.

"If you're experiencing AF symptoms but do not yet have a diagnosis, seek medical advice today," Graeme said.

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To coordinate an interview with Graeme, 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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