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MEDIA RELEASE

## Researcher irons out own health issue, while working on it

There's irony in the fact that Dan Johnstone was studying haemochromatosis when his own high iron levels identified him as the 'one in 200' impacted by this emergent condition.

A decade ago, some unrelated health concerns led Dr Johnstone to visit a GP for a battery of medical tests which found elevated iron levels and further tests revealed haemochromatosis – the most common genetic disorder in Australia.

"I was the first in my family to be diagnosed with the condition. My father, who was 50 at the time, subsequently had the genetic test and was diagnosed with haemochromatosis too, which might explain the minor health issues he was suffering at the time," Dr Johnstone said.

The genetic test to identify haemochromatosis was only developed two decades ago and is yet to be made available for population screening.

"Now that my Dad and I know we have the condition, all we do is donate blood regularly to keep our iron levels stable," he said. "Haemochromatosis is not a burden in your life if you get on to it early, and the treatment – giving blood – provides a benefit to others."

Dr Johnstone did his PhD on iron effects in the brain at the University of Newcastle and now researches neuroprotection for older-age diseases including Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease at The University of Sydney.

"Even though I was working on haemochromatosis, I had no idea that I had the condition until I was tested. I feel fortunate it was picked up in my late 20s because it doesn't usually show symptoms until your 50s when damaging complications can arise."

He urges young people to take action, ask their doctor for a blood test and if iron levels are high then a genetic test for haemochromatosis, because one in seven people carry the condition. Those of Irish and European descent are more at risk of carrying and inheriting it.

Haemochromatosis Australia President Dr Dianne Prince said fatigue is the main symptom of the condition and early diagnosis is key to managing and reducing complications.

"Recent research showed that undiagnosed haemochromatosis quadruples the risk of liver disease, doubles risk of arthritis and causes higher risk of diabetes and chronic pain," Dr Prince said.

"The research supports the case for a national screening program to identify those at risk of developing iron overload and associated preventable chronic conditions, but in the meantime it is up to individuals to find out more themselves."

Haemochromatosis Australia is currently running an awareness campaign to highlight that while haemochromatosis may be tricky to say, it is easy to test, simple to treat and tragic to ignore.

To find out if you might be rusting from within and need to iron out your health, visit the Haemochromatosis Australia website [ha.org.au](http://ha.org.au) or view the awareness campaign videos here <https://www.youtube.com/user/HaemochromatosisAust> or on social media channels.

### Key points:

- Haemochromatosis is the most common genetic disorder in Australia
- If you are the 1 in 200 affected, it can cause serious health problems
- Ask your doctor, find out if you are storing too much iron