

Undiagnosed iron overload linked to chronic disease and death in thousands of Australians

More than one hundred thousand Australians are at greater risk of developing liver cancer, arthritis, diabetes and other chronic conditions because of undiagnosed haemochromatosis, a disorder where the body absorbs too much iron.

One in seven Australians carry a mutation of the defective gene and one in 200 Australians have an increased chance of developing the disorder but few know about haemochromatosis let alone have had a test for the hereditary condition.

The condition also known as 'Iron overload' has been historically under diagnosed because its non-specific symptoms – including fatigue, depression and joint pain are often confused with a range of other illnesses. Unfortunately, most of those affected aren't diagnosed until aged in their mid-forties and suffering ill health as a result.

If diagnosed early the treatment for haemochromatosis is simple, safe and effective. It consists of regular removal of blood, known as venesection.

Murdoch Children's Research Institute and Medical Director of Victorian Clinical Genetics Service, Professor Martin Delatycki, said "Recent findings from UK research led by the University of Exeter identified higher risks of liver disease, arthritis and other chronic conditions in people with haemochromatosis, supporting the case for a national screening program here in Australia."

The Exeter study projected that more than seven percent of men with two copies of the faulty haemochromatosis gene develop liver cancer by age 75, compared to just 0.6 percent in the general population.

Previously, the Exeter team found that having the haemochromatosis double faulty gene quadruples the risk of liver disease and doubles the risk of arthritis and frailty in older age groups. It also causes higher risk of diabetes and chronic pain.

Professor Delatycki's own research here in Australia showed that even in cases when iron stores were only mildly elevated patients benefitted from venesections and were unlikely to develop chronic conditions associated with iron overload.

Haemochromatosis Australia president, Dr Dianne Prince said, "Hereditary haemochromatosis is estimated to cost Australia's health system over \$280 million annually and add further cost burdens by compounding other chronic conditions when left undiagnosed and untreated. When the body absorbs too much iron from food the excess iron overloads body tissues, damages organs and can cause premature death. It can be easily managed, but sadly we continue to hear from people with significant health problems caused by a late diagnosis. It's quite common for people with these symptoms to think they're actually iron deficient and take supplements, not knowing it's the last thing they need. We urge people to get their iron levels checked before taking iron supplements or iron fortified foods."

One man who would have benefitted from early treatment is James Barclay from Wagga Wagga, New South Wales. At 54, James was diagnosed with liver cirrhosis and liver cancer as a consequence of undiagnosed haemochromatosis. Ironically, he'd regularly had blood tests because of his exposure to lead but never had his iron levels tested. "I put my symptoms down to ageing and my line of work and only got tested for haemochromatosis after my daughter was found to have high iron levels and was subsequently diagnosed." Of Mr Barclay's six siblings one brother also has discovered he has the condition and another brother has been identified as a carrier of the faulty gene and his daughter has tested positive for iron overload.

World Haemochromatosis Week begins 1 June, 2021. Over 30 well-known buildings and landmarks around Australia will be illuminated in red to raise awareness about the condition and prompt people to get tested.

For more information about World Haemochromatosis Week, visit Haemochromatosis Australia www.ha.org.au or call 1300 019 028.

Interviews with Professor Delatycki, Dr Prince and Mr Barclay available on request as are state based patients with Haemochromatosis

-ENDS-

Media contact:

Kellie Curtain Tel: 0412339690 email: kellie@indeliblemarks.net

Buildings and Landmarks illuminating Red

VICTORIA

Melbourne

MCG (4 June)

Melbourne Star Observation Wheel (4 June)

Federation Square North Façade (1-7 June)

AAMI Park (1-7 June)

Dandenong

The Drum (4-7 June)

Wodonga

Water Tower (1-7 June)

Shepparton

Mooroopna Water Tower (1-7 June)

Monash Park Tree (1-7 June)

Fryers Street trees (1-7 June)

Bendigo

Conservatory Building (1-7 June)

Geelong

Centenary lights (1-3 June)

Ballarat

Clocktower face (1-7 June)

QUEENSLAND

Brisbane

Story Bridge (5 June)

Kurilpa Bridge (5 June)

Victoria Bridge (5 June)

Reddacliff Place sculptures and

Donna Marcus: *Steam 2006* (5 June)

Townsville

Queensland Country Bank Stadium (4 June)

Townsville sign (4-5 June)

Victoria Bridge (4-5 June)

Wharton Reef Lighthouse (4-5 June)

George Roberts Bridge (4-5 June)

Old Magistrates Court House (4-5 June)

Little Fletcher Bridge (4-5 June)

Gold Coast

Sky Point Building (2 June)

Cairns

Munro Martin Parklands (4-7 June)

Toowoomba

Victoria Street Bridge and City Hall Annex (4-7 June)

Bundaberg

Fig Trees at the Multiplex Sport and Convention Centre (1-7 June)

AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

Canberra

Telstra Tower (3 June)

National Carillion (4-7 June)

WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Perth

Council House (4-5 June)

Trafalgar Bridge (4-5 June)

Bunbury

Koombana Bridge (4-7 June)

Kalgoorlie

Eastern Goldfields Community Centre (1-6 June)

The William Grundt Memorial Library (1-6 June)

NORTHERN TERRITORY

Palmerston

Water Tower (1-7 June)

NEW SOUTH WALES

Sydney

Bankwest Stadium, Sydney Olympic Park (1 June)

Newcastle

Clock tower (1 June)

Coffs Harbour

Big Banana (1 June)

Port Macquarie

The Glasshouse (1-7 June)

TASMANIA

Hobart

Rose Garden Bridge, Elizabeth Mall,

Railway Roundabout Fountain,

Franklin Square, Cardinal lights (24-30 May)

Launceston

Town Hall (7 June)

Devonport

paranaple convention centre (1-7 June)

Burnie

Burnie City Council Offices (1-7 June)

SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Adelaide

Adelaide Oval (1 June)

Adelaide Town Hall (1 June)

Adelaide Riverbank Footbridge (1-3 June; 6-7 June)

Mt Gambier

Riddoch Arts and Cultural complex

including Old Town Hall (1-7 June)

Tower on top of Mt Gambier (1-7 June)

The Lady Nelson Historic Ship (1-7 June)