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# Genetic heart alert saves family

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Twenty one years ago a fit and healthy Nick Prestipino was on his way to having a heart attack because of a potentially lethal genetic disorder he had no idea he had inherited.

It was not until his father died from a heart attack that the now 60-year-old had his cholesterol checked and discovered his levels were dangerously high and he was lucky to have avoided heart failure.

His cholesterol levels were due entirely to genes and a disorder called familial hypercholesterolaemia (FH).

Mr Prestipino was immediately put on cholesterol lowering statin drugs but because of the already severe damage to his arteries, he had bypass surgery 10 years ago.

Three of Mr Prestipino's four sons have inherited the disorder and face

taking statin drugs for the rest of their lives to ensure their cholesterol levels do not soar.

An estimated 40,000 Australian men and women have the disorder but up to 80 per cent are undiagnosed.

"As time passed it got worse and worse," Mr Prestipino said. "I would have dropped dead like my Dad did."

"That's the problem of not knowing that you've got it. What happens is you either have a heart attack and drop dead or have a stroke or something and that's what I'm trying to make my sons understand."

"If they don't take medication now, as time goes on the arteries are getting more and more blocked and the time will come where they will have to have a heart operation."

Son David Prestipino was diagnosed with the condition about 10 years ago when he was 19. "Even



Life changing: David and Nick Prestipino say being diagnosed with the genetic disorder familial hypercholesterolaemia has saved their lives. Picture: Sandra Jackson.

though it's bad that I've got it this young, it's lucky in a way that it's been detected early in that unlike Dad, who had to go through massive heart oper-

ations and things, I can get on the tablets early to treat it and hopefully avoid that happening," he said.

Professor of medicine and head of

the lipid disorders clinic at Royal Perth Hospital Gerald Watts said it was vital people with a family history of early heart disease had their cholesterol levels checked. He said people who had an immediate female family member with a history of heart failure before age 60 and a male family member with a history of heart problems before 55 should be checked.

A Department of Health pilot program aims to have more people diagnosed with the disorder so they can be treated early and avoid heart failure.

The program is the first of its kind in Australia and department genomics director Peter O'Leary said it had the potential to prevent 26 heart attacks for every person identified with FH.

"For each individual diagnosed with FH, between two and four family members will also be identified and treated," he said.