



Disorder putting children in heart-risk picture

Sep 15 Try to imagine somebody at high-risk of a premature
24 heart attack and you'll most probably conjure a middle-aged, ruddy-faced, overweight, male smoker, possibly with a beer in hand.

But Professor Gerald Watts, Head of the Lipid Disorders Clinic at Royal Perth Hospital wants us to broaden this image to include children and adolescents.

His reason for this is Familial Hypercholesterolaemia (FH), an inherited condition in which the liver's ability to remove low-density lipoprotein (LDL) – commonly known as 'bad cholesterol' – from the blood is severely impaired and the blood cholesterol level (a major determinant of heart disease) is doubled from birth. This can lead to premature coronary artery disease, heart attack and early death.



Professor Gerald Watts, Head of the Lipid Disorders Clinic at Royal Perth Hospital

On [International FH Awareness Day \(external site\)](#) 24 September, Professor Watts reveals that being an inherited condition, even young children with FH may be at risk of a premature heart attack in the future.

But he warns that about 80 per cent of the estimated 77,000 Australians with the disorder do not even know they have it and so are not getting the vital treatment they need.

Professor Watts attributes this to a lack of awareness of the condition, even among experienced health practitioners.

"Without treatment, a person with FH can develop coronary artery disease by the time they are in their early twenties or thirties and many will go on to have heart attacks, some of them fatal," he says.

"But with early detection, healthy lifestyle changes and cholesterol-lowering medication, we can delay – and in some cases even prevent – the development of coronary artery disease.

"The key is finding these people early enough and delivering the right treatment in a timely manner."

FH affects about one in 300 people.

Professor Watts said anybody with an immediate family member who had had premature coronary artery disease, a premature heart attack or been diagnosed with FH should be screened for the condition because 50 per cent could be expected to be affected by FH – including children.

In males a heart attack is deemed premature if it occurs before the age of 55, while in females it is before the age of 60.

Professor Watts said children from families with FH should be screened by no later than 10 years of age.

“A child diagnosed with FH can take preventative measures that include adopting a heart-healthy diet, exercising regularly, choosing not to smoke and – from the age of about 8 – safely commencing cholesterol-lowering medication,” he said.

“Management and monitoring that begins in childhood can add decades of healthy life to a child or teen with FH.”

An FH diagnoses can be made using a combination of blood-cholesterol testing, family history and – if available – genetic testing.

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