

Fingers on the pulse to detect atrial fibrillation

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Dale Griffiths says he is still looking for more pharmacies to take part. Pharmacists around the country are now customers' pulses as part of Heart Rhythm Week to detect atrial fibrillation.

It is hoped the awareness week, which runs until Friday 28 June, will lift public perception of atrial fibrillation (AF) as well as detecting it. Pharmacists will also show customers how to take their own pulse.

The Heart Rhythm Week initiative is in its fourth year in New Zealand. It was begun overseas by the Heart Rhythm Alliance in conjunction with the International Pharmacists for Anticoagulation Care Taskforce (iPACT) and Arrhythmia Alliance in the UK.

The New Zealand organiser, Westview Pharmacy's Dale Griffiths, says finding someone with undiagnosed AF in the first year the week was held raised awareness of, and support for, testing from GPs.

"I'm really lucky that the doctors I work with are all aware of it...they know that we can do this, and it helps that relationship."

Seeking more pulse-takers

Mr Griffiths is looking for more pharmacies to take part, adding checking pulses is an easy job.

"It would be nice if more people got involved because we need to do new things as a profession...It's just a little bit of advice and holding somebody's wrist for 30 seconds and counting, and you can teach somebody to do it themselves."

Several new pharmacies have signed up this year, including Kaeo Chemist in the Far North and Strathmore Park Pharmacy in Wellington.

Although anyone can be tested, the aim is to test those over 60 who are most at risk. Around 1.4 to 1.7 per cent of people over 60, who are tested by pharmacists, are found to have atrial fibrillation.

The incidence of AF increases with age - around 10 per cent of those over 80 will have AF, which is often overlooked, says Mr Griffiths.

“It’s one of those things with an aging population,” he says.

Although it can occur in young people, he says, it is far less likely, particularly if the customer has no symptoms.

Those who are found to have an abnormal heart rhythm are referred to a GP who can confirm the diagnosis and prescribe anticoagulants to help reduce the risk of stroke, which is around five times higher in people with AF.

“Putting them on an anticoagulant reduces the risk of stroke by about 60 per cent, so it’s quite a big bang-for-your-buck treatment,” Mr Griffiths says.