

Nation of clot clots

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The vast majority of us have no idea about one of our biggest killers.

Blood clots, formed in arteries and veins, are responsible for our top three types of cardiovascular death — heart attacks, strokes and venous thromboembolism.

Yet nine out of 10 Aussies remain ignorant of the dangers of clotting, which can strike at any age and end the lives of 40 people daily.

According to new research from Bayer pharmaceutical company, only a third of 18 to 24-year-olds have heard of deep vein thrombosis (DVT) and pulmonary embolisms (PE), while less than 50 per cent of those aged 25 to 34 recognised the terms.

Just nine per cent of the latter group thought blood clots (otherwise known as thrombus) were the greatest threat to their lives.

Emeritus Prof of Haematology at Monash University Hatem Salem, who has 35 years' experience in the field, said he was surprised by the findings.

"The most common cause of mortality in Australia today is arterial thrombosis (far more than cancer)," Prof Salem said.

"Young people have too many things to draw their attention and distract them. They're more interested in how their iPhone works than how their body works."

The research found nearly two in three wrongly believed flying was a major risk factor for blood clots, but hospital patients have 25 times the chance of developing the condition than those taking to the skies.

"If the operation is long and causes the person to lie in bed for a long period or if the operation is associated with prolonged immobility, for example a knee or hip replacement, the risk of having a clot is extremely high.

"Pregnancy and the pill (hormone replacement or contraceptive) are also common risk factors, and if people are aware of this, it will go a long way in trying to minimise the development of this complication."

The findings have been released today to mark the inaugural World Thrombosis Day.

Leading organisations the Stroke Foundation and the Australasian Society of Thrombosis and Haemostasis (ASTH) are out to raise awareness about this life-threatening condition.

"Education about health and disease prevention is something that should take more precedence than knowing how to operate gadgets," Prof Salem said.

“We need to make blood clots and thrombosis an important health issue alongside heart attacks and diabetes.”

National Stroke Foundation chief executive Dr Erin Lalor said more than 50,000 people will be diagnosed with a stroke each year.

One of them was 19-year-old Melissa Cowie.

Stroke was the last thing she thought about when she had aching eyes, was seeing black spots, had double vision and felt pins and needles down her left-hand-side.

“I thought I had slept funny and had a pinched nerve in my shoulder,” Cowie said.

“I really didn’t know what was going on. I actually ignored it and tried to go to work. I went upstairs and had a shower thinking it would make me feel better.

“My head just didn’t feel like it belonged to my body,” she said.

When she looked in the mirror and the left-hand-side of her face was droopy, she said she started to think something wasn’t right, but still didn’t take it seriously.

Her mother convinced her to go to hospital and when she did, the diagnosis “devastated” her.

“I didn’t want to talk to any of the doctors ... I just fell apart.”

Cowie said she was in the stroke unit for a fortnight.

For the next few years she said she was terrified she would suffer another stroke and was emotionally and psychologically scarred, discovering she had post-traumatic stress.

Now, at 28, she is all but fully recovered.

“If you didn’t know that I’d had a stroke, you wouldn’t know just by looking at me.”

But, Cowie said she has decreased sensation in her left-hand side, gets quite fatigued and is on blood-thinning tablets from now on.

“It has changed my life completely. It made me realise my own mortality.

“It can happen to anyone, at any time, regardless of your age,” she said.