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Media Statement

OLDER AUSTRALIANS URGED TO CHECK IRON LEVELS

West Australian health experts are urging adult Australians to have their iron levels checked with local research showing the risk of iron overload complications increases with age.

For the first time, researchers have been able to develop a model that predicts the future likelihood of developing significant iron overload in hereditary hemochromatosis (iron-overload disease) in adults.

Hemochromatosis is a common inherited disorder triggering the body to absorb more iron than usual from food, which leads to elevated iron levels and complications that include cirrhosis, liver fibrosis and arthritis.

Co-author of the study and Western Australian Institute for Medical Research (WAIMR) Deputy Director Professor John Olynyk has just returned from a presentation of the group's findings at an international conference – 'The Liver Meeting 2008' in San Francisco (October 31 to November 4).

"This study has enabled us to better predict the future for people with hemochromatosis and we discovered that as they age, men have a one in three chance of developing significant iron overload, while women had about a one in six chance," Professor Olynyk said.

"The study has also shown us that by the age of 55 it's going to be clear whether a person is ever likely to suffer from iron overload in hereditary hemochromatosis."

"We looked at the iron levels of people with untreated hereditary hemochromatosis between 40 and 69 years of age and found those people who had very high iron stores by the age of 55 were most at risk of progressive iron overload over the next 10 to 14 years, but if they hadn't started rising by 55, there was much less risk of iron-overload."

Professor Olynyk said the effect seen in men was not seen in women.

"It is interesting to note that the majority of women show a gradual increase in iron levels, but not to levels significant enough to present a risk to health, which could be due to a number of factors including menstruation and menopause," he said.

Hemochromatosis - the most common genetic disease among Anglo-Celtic Australians - is commonly caused by two genetic mutations of the HFE gene.

Professor Olynyk said most people with hemochromatosis didn't even know it, but screening was as simple as a blood test that a GP could arrange.

"I'd urge every Australian adult, especially men, to have their iron levels checked because hemochromatosis is one of the most common genetic conditions that is easily managed but can lead to serious complications if left untreated," he said.

This study, known as *HealthIron*, measured the iron levels of 203 participants between 40 to 69 years of age at the start of the study and then 10 to 14 years later and was published in *Gastroenterology* online on September 16.

Research co-authored by Professor Olynyk and published in *New England Journal of Medicine* in January showed men with the disease were 30 times more likely to develop complications than women.

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