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******media release******

1.5 million at risk Australians urged to check for kidney disease in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic

The peak body for kidney disease in Australia is urging 1.5 million at risk Australians to check for this silent and potentially deadly disease, as Australia starts emerging from COVID-19 restrictions.

Kidney Health Australia said the pandemic had highlighted the group of people most at risk of more severe illness from COVID-19 were the same group of people most at risk of kidney disease.

“People most vulnerable to COVID-19 suffer from chronic medical conditions such as diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease,” said Mr Forbes, CEO of Kidney Health Australia.

“These same conditions cause kidney disease - so we’re urging the 1.5 million Australians with these kidney risk factors, to check their kidney health with their GP and avoid the dangers of kidney disease and serious illnesses such as COVID-19.”

“Australia has been fortunate in escaping the high mortality rate of other countries but it’s shown that we can’t afford to be complacent in the face of future outbreaks,” Mr Forbes said.

Mr Forbes said 1.5 million Australians who fall into this high risk group are unaware they are living with the early signs of kidney disease.

“The real danger with kidney disease is it’s an insidious disease and people can be on the brink of renal failure before they suspect anything is wrong,” Mr Forbes said.

Father of five, 47-year-old Shane Jeeves, knows the debilitating impact of kidney disease. Hooked to a dialysis machine every second day for 7 hours at a time, Shane has also had to stop work altogether due to fears of contracting COVID-19 and believes a lot more Australians are at risk than they realise.

“I had no idea I had kidney issues. I played cricket twice a week, I wasn’t overweight. That’s the thing. Most people with kidney damage don’t even know they have it and continue doing damage to themselves without knowing,” said Shane.

It’s a concern shared by leading nephrologist and Clinical Director of Kidney Health Australia, Associate Professor Shilpa Jesudason.

'Most people with kidney disease aren't aware they have it, so they are missing out on kidney preserving treatments that could slow or stop their kidney disease if caught early enough,' said A/Prof. Jesudason.

'Chronic kidney disease currently costs the taxpayer \$5bn annually. Dialysis alone costs \$1bn. And of course the potential health cost to Australians developing advanced kidney disease is incalculable,' said Mr Forbes.

'COVID-19 has exposed the vulnerability of people with chronic conditions and that's why we're calling on Australians to get their kidney health checked now if they have, or fit, any of the following criteria: diabetes, high blood pressure, are over 60, overweight, or a smoker.

'We also encourage all people who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander to consider having a health check.'

'But we're also actively seeking funding for early detection programs, which would not only save lives and protect the 1.5 million at risk, it will save money downstream by avoiding costly and devastating medical complications,' said Mr Forbes.

'The biggest weapon we have in protecting the health of people at risk of kidney disease is to shift the focus to preserving their kidney health, instead of replacement therapies that limit their quality of life and still leave them vulnerable to contracting other illnesses.'

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Reviewed and endorsed by the Australian and New Zealand Society of Nephrology

Available for comment:

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About Kidney Health Australia

At Kidney Health Australia, we are a leading voice for the kidney community, providing vital resources and support to people affected by kidney disease and working closely with clinical and research community to support treatment and research improvements, so that one day every Australian can live with better kidney health.

Kidney Health Facts

- Kidney-related disease kills more people than breast cancer, prostate cancer and road accidents
- Figures released by the Bureau of Statistics late last year revealed that 65 people are dying with kidney-related disease every day
- Kidney disease sufferers can lose 90% of kidney function without experiencing any symptoms
- One in three people living in Australia is at risk of developing chronic kidney disease
- Of the staggering 1.7 million people affected by kidney disease, 1.5 million are not aware they have it
- One in five Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders have indicators of chronic kidney disease and are four times more likely to die from it than the non-Indigenous population

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