

Apple Watch alerts catch life-threatening cancer just in time



Apple's Vitals app noticed the repeatedly elevated heart rate that sent her to the doctor, resulting in the alarming diagnosis. Photo: Apple

DAVID SNOW 7:49 AM, APRIL 10, 2025

We hear plenty of stories about Apple Watch saving lives, but they rarely if ever involve cancer — until now. According to news from down under, Apple Watch's persistent alerts about an elevated heart rate helped save a New Zealand psychiatrist's life, leading to a diagnosis of acute myeloid leukemia just hours before potential organ failure.

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Dr. Amanda Faulkner, 51, a consultant psychiatrist, recently treated herself to a new Apple Watch Series 10 after years of using her husband's older model. She initially dismissed the high heart rate warnings she get getting as a fault in the device. But she soon found out the wearable turned out to be a life-saving purchase.

“I kept on ignoring it until it got to the point where it was literally screaming at me,” Faulkner, who is generally healthy and physically active, [told 1News](#).

[Apple Watch 10 and its Vitals app](#) measure various health metrics, including heart rate, respiratory rate, wrist temperature, blood oxygen and sleep duration. They began sending consistent notifications that her resting heart rate had jumped from its usual 55 beats per minute overnight to above 90 BPM.

“Hand on heart, if it wasn’t for my smartwatch constantly nagging me, I wouldn’t have even noticed something was wrong,” she [explained to the *The New Zealand Herald*](#).

Although she had been experiencing symptoms like fatigue, feeling hot and a heavy menstrual flow, Faulkner, who maintains a busy practice with over 60 patients, had attributed these to hot weather or possibly perimenopause.

“I thought I was probably just a bit anemic,” she said.

Critical timing

After persistent alerts from the Vitals app on her watch, which reported outliers every morning, Faulkner finally visited her doctor. She shared graphs from her Apple Watch displaying a clear trend of elevated heart rates.

Her doctor immediately referred her for further testing. Within just four hours, Faulkner received a devastating diagnosis: Acute Myeloid Leukemia, a rare and aggressive form of blood cancer.

“It’s like a nuclear bomb going off in your life,” she told [1News](#). “I’m a very optimistic, cheerful person, and I’m a strong person, but you never know how you’re going to react. I felt numb, I felt distraught. It’s like you’re on a rollercoaster that you never chose to be on but once you’re on it, you just have to sit there and go along for the ride.”

The timing of her diagnosis proved critical. Doctors informed Faulkner that had she delayed seeking medical attention for another 48 hours, she likely would not have survived.

“I was just on the verge of multiple organ failure. I was literally hours away from death, so I got rushed down to Palmerston North Hospital, started on chemotherapy, and I’m still here,” she said.

Ongoing treatment and outlook

Since her diagnosis in January, Faulkner has received chemotherapy. Though currently in remission, her particular type of cancer has a high chance of relapse. Her treatment plan includes an upcoming stem cell transplant. It will essentially give her a new immune system.

As a medical doctor, Faulkner is fully aware of the gravity of her situation. She acknowledges that the stem cell procedure carries a 20% mortality risk.

“It’s pretty confronting,” she told the *Herald*. But she remains optimistic. Her husband credits Apple Watch with making a “life-changing difference” by giving them early warning, increasing his wife’s odds of beating cancer.

Apple Watch alerts: Health tech as early warning system

Apple emphasizes that its heart monitoring features — [some approved by the FDA](#) — are not diagnostic tools or meant for continuous monitoring. Rather, the company frames them as screening tools that can alert users to potential conditions and provide additional information to share with healthcare providers.

Dr. Sumbul Desai, Apple’s vice-president of health, previously told the *Herald* that while the Watch should not be considered a diagnostic tool, feedback suggests an elevated heart rate “can be a good indicator of a number of conditions,” including impending fever or allergic reactions.

Research at the University of Auckland is exploring how smartwatch data might be integrated into clinical practice. Dr. Ruhi Bajaj, a health informatics researcher, noted in a 2023 study that “with the enhancements in machine learning algorithms and likely new healthcare roles, wearables have the potential to transform our healthcare models from reactive to proactive and prescriptive.”

A call for self-advocacy

Faulkner now encourages others to seek medical attention if they notice persistent, unusual symptoms — particularly women, who she feels are sometimes dismissed when raising health concerns. And Apple Watch alerts can help.

“Be an advocate for your own well-being,” Faulkner advised. “The earlier you get on and treat something the better the outcome.”