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# Understanding cardiac rehabilitation



## About this booklet

You may have been given this booklet because you or someone you know is going to cardiac rehabilitation (cardiac rehab).

This booklet can support you during cardiac rehab. It can help you:

- understand what cardiac rehab is
- prepare for your cardiac rehab programme
- learn how to make long-term, manageable changes.

We're here to support you and your loved ones every step of the way.



Call 0808 802 1234 (freephone)  
to speak to a cardiac nurse.  
Our helpline is open weekdays  
9am to 5pm (excluding bank  
holidays).

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## What is cardiac rehab?

Cardiac rehabilitation, or cardiac rehab, is a structured programme of exercise, education and support. You could think of it as recovery for your heart.

It can help you get back to as full a life as possible after having a heart attack, being diagnosed with a heart condition such as heart failure, or after a heart procedure like an angioplasty.

Watch our short video explaining cardiac rehab at [bhf.org.uk/rehab](https://bhf.org.uk/rehab)

“

It bridges  
the gap  
from the  
hospital bed  
to living  
your life.

Angela

## What you'll get out of cardiac rehab

Cardiac rehab is an important part of your recovery. It's as important as taking medicine or having a procedure.

Built around you and your needs, it can help you:

- understand your heart condition
- feel fitter and be more active
- look after your heart health
- feel more confident managing your health
- manage side effects and medicines
- look after your physical and emotional wellbeing.

It's also an opportunity to meet other people going through a similar situation. Cardiac rehab gives you the chance to ask questions so you can live well.

“

There was a  
real sense of  
camaraderie.  
You talked to other  
people, shared  
experiences.  
It stopped me  
feeling so isolated  
and I got stronger.

Phyllis

## Phases of cardiac rehab

You may hear your hospital or cardiac rehab team talk about phases.

The main phases of cardiac rehab are described below:

Some cardiac rehab centres can offer you a phase 4. This is more exercise and support with the team after you finish your first cardiac rehab programme (phase 3).

Speak to the nurses to see if it's available to you, and what other options there may be.

### **Phase 1** **In hospital**

When you're in hospital having treatment or recovering from it. You may be given information about cardiac rehab while you're in hospital.

### **Phase 2** **Returning home**

When you leave hospital and you're at home recovering. You may already have your cardiac rehab appointments booked in. Or you may get a call from the cardiac rehab team inviting you to book your cardiac rehab appointments.

### **Phase 3** **Your cardiac rehab**

This is the main part of cardiac rehab where you'll have exercise and education sessions lasting at least six weeks. It's personalised to you and your needs.

### **Phase 4** **Long-term health**

After you finish your cardiac rehab programme (phase 3), you'll continue to make healthy lifestyle choices to look after your heart health.

## What appointments will I have?

Cardiac rehab (phase 3) is made up of:

- an assessment appointment, looking at your needs and goals
- a programme including exercise sessions and education on topics, like medicines and diet
- a final appointment looking at how the programme went and next steps.

During your programme, you'll usually go to an appointment once or twice a week, for at least six weeks.

It can be difficult to think about more appointments, and fitting them in around your daily life. However, cardiac rehab is an important part of your recovery.

You can do cardiac rehab in a way that works for you, in person, at home or a combination of both. Speak to your cardiac rehab team to find out what options are available to you.

If you need extra support to be able to attend cardiac rehab, let the team know.

They can change the exercises based on your individual circumstances or any disabilities you have. They may also be able to provide an interpreter or other support to help you.

## How do I find my local cardiac rehab?

Your healthcare team will usually speak to you about cardiac rehab while you're in hospital.

If you have not been offered cardiac rehab and think you'd benefit from it, speak to your GP or get in touch with your local cardiac rehab team.

Find your local cardiac rehab programme at **cardiac-rehabilitation.net** or call British Heart Foundation's Heart Helpline on **0808 802 1234**.

“

I was quite anxious about going and didn't know what to expect. But I made really great friends and had great experiences, with people of all ages.

Wendy

## How can I prepare for cardiac rehab?

To get the most out of cardiac rehab it can help to think about what you want to achieve. Setting yourself specific goals will help keep you motivated and track your progress.

Do you want to:

- return to an activity you enjoyed before your diagnosis or surgery?
- gain more confidence so you can join a club or take up a new hobby?
- learn how to cook healthy, tasty recipes?

Write down what you'd like to achieve and any questions you might have on page 60.

## What happens before I start cardiac rehab?

You'll usually be told to only do light activities before starting cardiac rehab.

Light activities include:



**walking short distances**



**walking up and down the stairs a few times a day**



**light housework, with no hoovering or heavy lifting**

When you leave hospital, you'll usually have new medicines to take. The cardiac rehab team can help you to manage your medicines.



## Your first appointment

Your first appointment with your cardiac rehab team will help you plan your programme of support.

It's normal to feel nervous. By talking things through with your cardiac rehab team, you can feel more prepared and confident to start your programme.

To help them understand you and plan your rehab, your team may talk to you about:

- how you've been feeling physically and emotionally
- your condition
- any tests or treatment you've had or will have
- how you're getting on with any medicines you're taking
- your diet and lifestyle
- your daily activities before and after your heart event.

Your cardiac rehab programme can cover many topics. Pages 22 to 46 will give you an idea of the type of topics cardiac rehab can cover.

You can use this information to get an idea of what's important to you, and what you'd like to get out of the programme.

Your cardiac rehab team may bring in experts to talk about topics. For example, a dietitian may talk to you about diet, and a pharmacist about medicines.

You may also be able to bring along family members to the education sessions. This can help you stick to healthier choices, like cooking and keeping active.

“

It's really important  
to go because  
you've got all these  
questions going  
round in your head.  
And suddenly you  
go to cardiac rehab  
and there's people  
you can ask.

Angela

## Functional capacity test

When you start cardiac rehab, the team will check your fitness level and find an exercise level that's safe for you. This may be called a functional capacity test (FCT).

During cardiac rehab you will exercise at a moderate exercise level (see page 20).

After you finish cardiac rehab, you may do another fitness test. This is a good way to see how much you've improved, and it can give you confidence to keep exercising.

## What is a moderate exercise level?

During cardiac rehab you'll exercise at a moderate level. This makes sure you're exercising at a level that's safe for you.

Moderate exercise means you are slightly short of breath, but you can carry on a conversation. You'll also feel slightly warmer. This level of exercise increases your heart rate and helps your muscles become stronger.

Ask your cardiac rehab team what a moderate level is for you. You can use the space on page 60 to write it down so you can exercise at this level at home.

### It's normal to feel nervous

Some people feel nervous about exercising after a heart event or surgery.

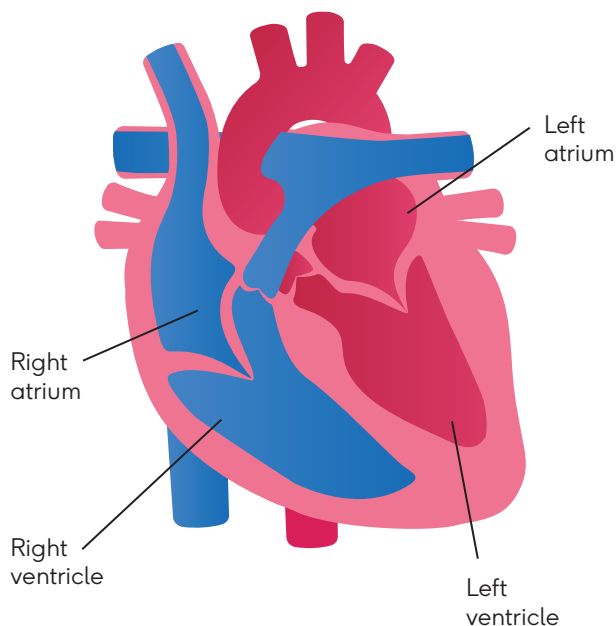
Speak to your cardiac rehab team if you're feeling nervous or unsure. They can reassure you and help you feel more confident.

Find more information on exercise during cardiac rehab on pages 32 to 37. There are also ideas for exercising at home and finding activities you enjoy.

## How your heart works

The cardiac rehab team can help you understand how your heart works and your heart condition.

### Your heart



The cardiac rehab team can answer questions about your diagnosis, and any tests, treatments or medicines you've had.

Some people find this helps them come to terms with what has happened, especially if it all happened very quickly.

If there's anything you do not understand or you need help with, speak to them. It may feel embarrassing or uncomfortable to ask questions, but you will feel better once you do.

You can find more information about how your heart works on our website: **[bhf.org.uk/yourheart](https://bhf.org.uk/yourheart)**

## Medicines

You'll usually be given new medicines when you leave hospital.

In cardiac rehab you can learn more about your new medicines, what they do and what to do about any side effects.

You can find more information on individual medicines on our website:

**[bhf.org.uk/medication](https://www.bhf.org.uk/medication)**

Many people find it hard to take medicine every day. But there are simple steps to make it easier:



Get into a routine



Give your body time to get used to medicines



Be mindful of your mental wellbeing



Speak to your pharmacist or GP before taking other medicines or supplements as they can interact with your medicine



Plan your medicine if you go away

## Support with side effects and symptoms

Your heart condition or medicines you're taking may give you symptoms and side effects, such as feeling more tired than usual, changes to your weight or sleep, or feeling breathless.

Lots of people have no side effects, but for some people they can have a big impact on their daily life.

Cardiac rehab can help you manage any side effects. Your cardiac rehab team can speak to your GP or hospital team to get you help with side effects, help you to get into a routine and find ways of dealing with side effects.

They can also help you monitor your health so you can speak to your doctor about any changes, or any extra support you need. They're there to support you.

It's important to keep taking any medicine you're prescribed. Do not stop taking any medicine without talking to your cardiac rehab nurses or a doctor first.

You can also speak to British Heart Foundation cardiac nurses for support.



Call 0808 802 1234 (freephone)  
or email [hearthelpline@bhf.org.uk](mailto:hearthelpline@bhf.org.uk)  
Our helpline is open weekdays,  
9am to 5pm (excluding  
bank holidays).

## Dealing with fatigue (feeling very tired)

You may feel more tired than usual. This can be caused by your heart condition, how you're feeling or a side effect of medicine you're taking.

When you're feeling tired it can be more difficult to go to appointments and be active. But cardiac rehab can help give you more energy and boost your mood.

The cardiac rehab team and other people from your class may also have helpful tips for dealing with fatigue.

Here are some tips which may help:

- **Pace yourself** – if you have a busy day coming up, make sure you have a rest day before or after.

- **Balance your day** – with time for activities and rest and break your day up so you have time to rest.
- **Plan social activities around your energy levels** – meet friends and family at places where you can sit and socialise, for example at a café.
- **Eat regularly** – if you're struggling with your usual diet, try having smaller meals more often to give you energy.

Do not be afraid to ask people for help. Your friends and family could help you with everyday activities, like food shopping, walking pets or picking up children from school.

If fatigue is affecting your daily life speak to your healthcare team or GP. They can check why you're tired and rule out other causes.

## Healthy eating

Eating more fruit and vegetables and cutting back on food and drink that's high in saturated fat, sugar and salt can help look after your heart.

It can be difficult to know which foods are healthier, especially when you're cooking with lots of ingredients.

Your cardiac rehab team can give you information on eating, drinking and shopping for healthier food choices.

You can also use the food label card on page 31 to help work out if food is high (red), medium (orange) or low (green) for fat, saturated fat, sugars and salt.

Cut it out and take it with you when you go food shopping.



## Food labelling guide

	Fat	Saturates	Sugars	Salt
<b>Low</b> Healthier choice	3g or less	1.5g or less	5g or less	0.3g or less
<b>Medium</b> Ok most of the time	3.1g to 17.5g	1.6g to 5g	5.1g to 22.5g	0.31g to 1.5g
<b>High</b> Just occasionally	More than 17.5g	More than 5g	More than 22.5g	More than 1.5g

All measures per 100g

Cut out and keep



## Exercise

During cardiac rehab, exercise sessions will be created for your individual needs, ability and preference.

Your cardiac rehab team will also check your heart rate and breathing to make sure exercise is safe and the right level for you (see page 20).

The aim is to safely build your fitness, strength and confidence. You'll also be given information on how to be physically active at home. The activity you do will depend on what you enjoy, what is available locally and what the team feel would be most suitable for you.

The exercise sessions could be group classes, gym classes, individual sessions, walking programmes or programmes you can do at home.

The exercise session you do will usually be 45 minutes. It's usually split into three sections:

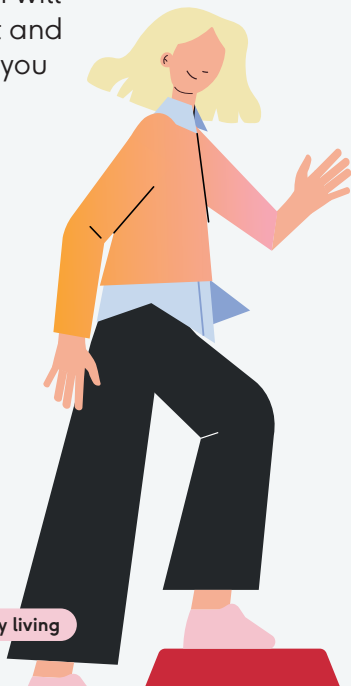
- **A warm-up** to prepare your body and heart for exercise and gradually raise your heart rate. It's normal to feel slightly warmer and a little out of breath.
- **A main exercise** or conditioning section to help improve your fitness and look after your heart health. It will last a bit longer than the warm-up and will be at a level that's safe for you.
- **A cool-down** to help your heart rate and breathing get back to your normal level.



You may also do some relaxation exercises after your cool-down. These may include meditation, breathing exercises and muscle relaxation for 10 minutes.

It's normal to feel nervous about exercising. Exercising with other people in a similar situation can help to give you confidence.

The cardiac rehab team will also be there to support and guide you, making sure you are exercising at a level that is safe.



“

It took away  
my fears about  
what my body  
was going to  
be able to do  
or not do.

Paula

## Exercise at home

You'll usually be encouraged by the cardiac rehab team to exercise at home as well as during cardiac rehab. This helps build up your fitness and confidence.

Lots of activities can get you moving, like walking, playing with kids or grandkids, gardening, or housework. It can give you a break from your busy day and be a good way to socialise.

British Heart Foundation can support you to exercise at home. Explore our cardiac rehab at home information for helpful exercise and lifestyle tips.

Cardiac rehab at home:  
**bhf.org.uk/cardiacrehab**

You can also find exercises to suit your ability on our website: **bhf.org.uk/activity**

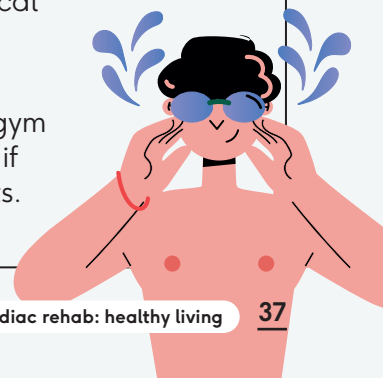
### Find free exercise classes

You may be able to find free classes in your area, like running or walking groups, or get discounts to your local gym. This is a great way to meet new people too.

Ask your cardiac rehab team if they know of any local classes or discounts available to you.

You could also try:

- searching '**free exercise classes in my area**' online
- contacting your local council or look on their website
- asking your local gym or swimming pool if they offer discounts.



“

Cardiac rehab  
gave me my body  
and life back.

Debs

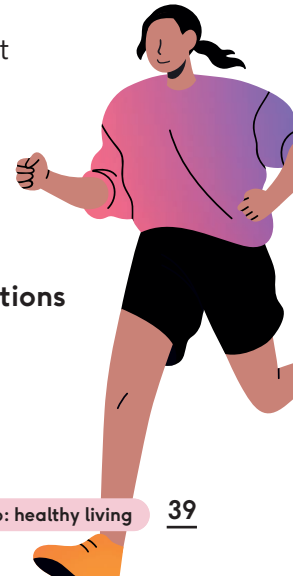
## Lifestyle changes

As well as support with healthy eating, emotional wellbeing and exercise, your programme may include sessions on lifestyle changes to help you:

- drink less alcohol
- stop smoking
- maintain a healthy weight.

The topics that you cover will be based on what is important and of interest to you.

You can find out more about the changes you could make in our **Understanding your heart health** booklet. Order it for free at [bhf.org.uk/publications](https://bhf.org.uk/publications)



## Sex and intimacy

Thinking about sex and intimacy can be scary after a heart attack, surgery or with a heart condition. You may also feel nervous talking about it during cardiac rehab.

Cardiac rehab is a safe space to ask any questions you might have.

Healthcare professionals will have talked to lots of other people about sex. It may not be easy to talk about at first, but most people say they feel a lot better afterwards and are glad they did.

You can also find more information on our website: **[bhf.org.uk/sex](https://bhf.org.uk/sex)**

## Driving

If you've had a heart event or a recent diagnosis, you may not be able to drive for a while. This will depend on:

- your condition
- any symptoms you have
- the type of treatment you've had
- if you have side effects from your medicines
- what vehicle you drive.

Your doctor can give you information on how long you'll need to wait before driving, and whether you need to tell the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA).

Cardiac rehab can help you find alternatives to driving and help you find out if you're entitled to free travel, like a free bus pass.

Read more on our website:

**[bhf.org.uk/driving](https://bhf.org.uk/driving)**

## Work

Some people feel like going back to work helps them get back to normal. But for others it can feel scary, and it might not be possible to return to work as they did before.

Everyone is different, and it's important to decide what's right for you.

During cardiac rehab you can learn:

- how to deal with going back to work
- about reasonable adjustments to help you work, like a phased return or reduced hours
- your rights at work.

It can also be helpful to speak to your employer. UK law requires most employers to make reasonable adjustments, so you can continue working despite the changes to your health.

Find out more about work on our website:  
**bhf.org.uk/work**

## Financial support

Finances can be an extra worry if you live with a heart or circulatory condition, or if you're recovering from a treatment like heart surgery.

If you need time off from work, or you cannot return to work, your cardiac rehab team can give you information on benefits and support available.

Find out more about financial support on our website: **bhf.org.uk/financial-support**

## Emotional support

After a heart event or diagnosis, it's normal to feel a mixture of emotions, like anger, frustration, loneliness and sadness.

Cardiac rehab can give you information about adjusting to life with a heart condition.

You may be able to get cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) as part of your programme or they can ask your GP to refer you. This is a type of talking therapy that can help you manage negative thoughts.

You can also find support from other people going through cardiac rehab. It can be easier to talk to people who understand what you're going through.

If you feel anxious or sad a lot of the time, and it's affecting your daily life, talk to your GP. Do not be afraid to ask for help, most people feel better once they do.

You can also speak to one of our cardiac nurses (see page 58).

“

Cardiac rehab  
opened my eyes  
to other support  
options which is also  
really valuable.

Chloe

## Monitoring your health

You may need to do some health checks at home, like:

- measuring your blood pressure
- keeping track of your heart rate
- keeping an eye on surgery wounds
- taking note of symptoms, like feeling breathless.

Your cardiac rehab team can answer any questions you have about this, and explain what you need to do if anything changes.

You may need to buy a blood pressure or heart rate monitor. You can buy a trusted machine online from BHF at **[bhf.org.uk/buy-bp-monitor](https://www.bhf.org.uk/buy-bp-monitor)**

Wearable devices and smartphone apps to monitor your heart rate are becoming more popular. They may not be as accurate as professional equipment. Speak to your healthcare team before using them.

## What happens at my final appointment?

Your final appointment will be an assessment with the cardiac rehab team. It's a chance to talk about your cardiac rehab progress, any questions you have, and any future health goals.

Your cardiac rehab team will also look at:

- **Your physical wellbeing** – what improvements you've made and how you can keep active after cardiac rehab.
- **Lifestyle support** – how you can look after your health by making lifestyle changes, like stopping smoking, having less salt and eating healthier.
- **Your emotional wellbeing** – how you're feeling following cardiac rehab and what support services are available to you.

This appointment can help you feel prepared for life after cardiac rehab. Asking any questions you have can help you stick to the changes you've made.



“

Recovery from a cardiac event can be like a roller coaster ride, good days and bad days, but following cardiac rehabilitation life will return to your normal. Just give it time.

Geoff

## What happens after cardiac rehab?

Finishing cardiac rehab may feel like you're leaving behind the support and routine you've got used to. It can feel daunting to keep making changes for yourself.

Your cardiac rehab team will let you know where to go if you need medical help after you finish cardiac rehab.

They should also be able to recommend local support schemes to help you.

You may want to ask them about:

- local gyms or swimming pools
- exercise classes
- walking groups
- local support groups
- online communities.

You could get together with people from your cardiac rehab class. It may help to stay active together, for example by meeting for a walk or joining a class together.

If you're not sure where to go and you're finding daily activities difficult, talk to your GP. Do not be afraid to ask for help, most people feel better once they do.

You can also speak to our cardiac nurses.



Call 0808 802 1234 (freephone)  
or email [hearthelpline@bhf.org.uk](mailto:hearthelpline@bhf.org.uk)  
Our helpline is open weekdays,  
9am to 5pm (excluding  
bank holidays).

## How can I make sure I stick to the changes?

As you come to the end of your cardiac rehab programme it can help to look at the goals you wanted to achieve and set new ones for the future.

Seeing what you've achieved so far can give you confidence to keep making changes and take control of your health. You could use the space on page 60 to write down things you'd like to achieve in the future.

You could also get your friends and family involved to help you stick to the changes, like cooking healthy meals together.

## Simple changes for a healthier heart

You could try one of our healthy tips this week.

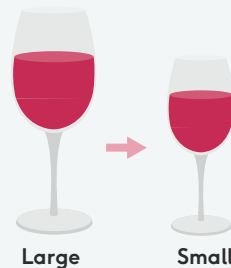
- ✓ Take a walk at lunch each day or set yourself a daily step goal.
- ✓ Swap butter for spreads made from olive, rapeseed or sunflower oils.
- ✓ Try a new hobby or class, like gardening, yoga or walking groups.
- ✓ Drink sugar-free drinks instead of full-sugar versions.
- ✓ Use spices and herbs to add flavour instead of salt.
- ✓ Make exercise social – you could go walking with a friend.
- ✓ Swap one meal with meat for fish or vegetables.



- ✓ Choose a half pint of beer or small glass of wine instead of a pint of beer or large glass of wine.
- ✓ Try grilling, boiling or baking your food instead of frying it to use less oil.

If you need inspiration why not try our **Understanding your heart health** booklet. It's filled with lots of simple, manageable swaps for a healthier heart.

It's also available in braille and easy read. Order your free copy online at [bhf.org.uk/publications](http://bhf.org.uk/publications)



## Try our exercise videos

If you'd like some extra support or want to continue with cardiac rehab after finishing your programme, you could try our cardiac rehab at home service.

This is a free service run by British Heart Foundation and is separate to your NHS cardiac rehab programme. You can:



**Sign up to our eight-week email programme** – get an email each week with tips and ideas on taking medicine, getting active, healthy eating and emotional support.



**Watch our cardiac rehab exercise videos** – our medical experts have created easy-to-follow videos for all levels, that you can do in your own time.



**Connect with others** – read about other people's experiences or join our online community to chat to other people.



**Find wellbeing support** – find information on looking after your physical and mental wellbeing.

Get this support online at  
**[bhf.org.uk/cardiacrehab](https://bhf.org.uk/cardiacrehab)**

## Getting support

Thinking about changes to your daily life can feel overwhelming, and you may not know where to start. But small changes can make a big difference.

In time you'll feel more confident in managing your health. British Heart Foundation can help you and your loved ones find more information on looking after your heart.

## Read our trusted information

Why not try one of our other booklets to help you manage your heart health?

They can help you to make easy swaps and manageable changes to look after your heart.



You can read them online or order them for free at **[bhf.org.uk/publications](https://bhf.org.uk/publications)**

You can also listen to our information, read it in braille, large print, easy read or another language. Find out more at **[bhf.org.uk/infoforall](https://bhf.org.uk/infoforall)**

## Call the Heart Helpline

If you or your family are affected by a heart or circulatory condition, our cardiac nurses can help you with your questions or concerns.



Call 0808 802 1234 (freephone)  
or email [hearthelpline@bhf.org.uk](mailto:hearthelpline@bhf.org.uk)  
Our helpline is open weekdays,  
9am to 5pm (excluding  
bank holidays).

You can also speak to our nurses using the live chat feature. Find out more at [bhf.org.uk/helpline](https://bhf.org.uk/helpline)

## Sign up to Heart Matters

Join to receive our free magazine or email newsletter, featuring expert tips, heart-healthy recipes, inspiring stories, and the latest updates backed by BHF-funded science.

Guided by our team of experts, Heart Matters helps you to make small changes for a healthier heart.

Subscribe to Heart Matters  
at [bhf.org.uk/heartmatters](https://bhf.org.uk/heartmatters)

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## This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

### Further information



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# We are British Heart Foundation



Through research, information and support we're here for everyone affected by heart and circulatory conditions.

## Get help

Speak to one of our experienced cardiac nurses for more information and support. They can help answer your questions, big or small.

You can call **0808 802 1234** (freephone).  
Our helpline is open weekdays, 9am to 5pm  
(excluding bank holidays).

## Support our work

If you've found this information helpful and would like to support our work, please scan the QR code or visit [bhf.org.uk/support-us](https://bhf.org.uk/support-us)



Scan here with  
the camera  
on your phone

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