



British Heart
Foundation

Your heart rate

What is your heart rate?

Your heart rate is the number of times your heart beats per minute. The heart, like any other muscle, needs physical activity to keep it in good condition.

In most cases regular exercise can help improve your overall heart health and help improve many of the 'risk factors' for heart and circulatory disease.

It is important to know if you are exercising at the correct level for you, and measuring your heart rate can help you track your level of fitness.

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FOR EVERY
HEARTBEAT**

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What is a normal heart rate?

A normal heart rate is between 70 and 100 beats per minute (bpm), whilst resting. However, it will vary depending on when it is measured and what you were doing immediately before the reading. For example, it will be higher when you walk compared to when you sit and rest. This is because your body needs more energy when you are active and so your heart has to work harder.

A safe heart rate while exercising

To make sure you increase your fitness and strength safely, it is important that you increase your heart rate to the right level while you are exercising. This means working out a safe range for your heart rate when you are taking exercise. To do this, you first need to work out your maximum heart rate (MHR).

Maximum heart rate

The maximum heart rate depends on your age. One way to work out your maximum heart rate is to take your age away from 220.

Example

The maximum heart rate for a 42 year old is:
 $220 - 42 = 178$ bpm (beats per minute)

If you have a heart condition it is important that you check with your doctor before doing any new exercises, in case they are not suitable for you.

You should always remember to warm up and cool down before and after exercising to avoid injury to your muscles.

Heart Helpline

Our cardiac nurses and information support officers are here to answer your questions and give you all the heart health information and support you need.

Call us on 0300 330 3311

Similar cost to 01 or 02 numbers.
Lines are open 9am - 5pm Monday to Friday.

This information does not replace the advice that your doctor or nurse may give you. If you are worried about your heart health in any way, contact your GP or local healthcare provider.

What is a target heart rate?

We should all aim to do at least 150 minutes of moderate intensity exercise every week. Moderate intensity means that you should feel warm and slightly breathless, but still able to hold a conversation. Aerobic exercise, such as cycling and dancing, is best as it helps improve the fitness of your heart and circulation and helps develop stamina.

Your target heart rate (THR) is between 50% and 70% of your maximum heart rate. You should aim to exercise with your heart rate between these two figures. To work out your target heart rate, multiply your maximum heart rate by 50% and 70%.

Example

To work out the target heart rate for a 42 year old:

$$178 \times 50\% = \mathbf{89 \text{ bpm}}$$

$$178 \times 70\% = \mathbf{125 \text{ bpm}}$$

So a 42 year old person should aim to exercise with their heart rate between 89 and 125 bpm.

What if I am taking medicines for a heart condition?

Many of the medicines used to treat heart conditions can slow down the heart rate and prevent the heart from responding as it normally would. So, if you are taking medicines, such as beta blockers for example, it may be easier and more effective to do the 'talk test' while you are exercising, rather than monitoring your heart rate. If, while you are walking, you feel warm and are breathing more heavily than normal, but you can still talk, you are probably walking at the right pace.

Do I need to buy a heart rate monitor?

You can measure your heart rate manually, by simply taking your pulse. However, you may be thinking about buying a heart rate monitor. There are many different types available for you to buy, and they can be found in most big high street shops and department stores, including some larger supermarkets and pharmacies.

Which type you choose will depend on what you want it to do, for example some heart rate monitors have additional built in features such as a calorie counter. If you simply want to measure your heart rate, choose a basic and inexpensive one. It will still do the job.