

Keep your heart healthy



About us

We are British Heart Foundation. We work with doctors and scientists to find treatments for heart problems. We want to learn how to treat heart problems and stop them from happening.

We have lots of information and support to help keep your heart healthy. This booklet tells you:

- what is heart disease
- who is more at risk of getting heart disease
- things you can do to keep your heart healthy.

What is heart disease?

Your heart is really important. It pumps blood around your body to keep you alive. Blood goes to and from your heart in small tubes called arteries.

Coronary heart disease is a health problem that affects your heart and arteries. It can happen when your arteries get blocked by too much fat sticking to the wall of your artery.

If your arteries get blocked or narrowed, your heart cannot work properly. It must work harder to pump blood around your body. If this happens in the arteries in your heart or brain, it is very serious. It can cause problems like a heart attack or a stroke. These can cause people to be very unwell or sadly die. It is important to try to protect yourself from heart disease.

Who is at risk of heart disease?

Anyone can have heart disease. You might be more at risk if you have 1 of these health conditions:

Type 2 diabetes

Type 2 diabetes happens because of too much sugar in your blood. This happens when your body does not make enough insulin. Our bodies need insulin to turn sugar into energy. Too much sugar in your blood can damage your arteries. Over time, this can cause heart disease.

High blood pressure

This is when the pressure of blood in your arteries is higher than it should be. Your heart must work extra hard to pump blood around your body.

High cholesterol

Cholesterol is a type of fat in your blood. You need some types of cholesterol but too much is bad for you. Too much cholesterol can narrow your arteries and make it harder for the blood to move through. If you have high cholesterol, you are more at risk of having a heart attack or stroke.

You have more chance of having heart disease if you:

- smoke
- drink too much alcohol
- do not move enough
- eat an unhealthy diet
- weigh too much
- feel stressed a lot.

Things you can do to keep your heart healthy

There are lots of small changes you can make to keep your heart healthy. They will make a big difference.

1. Eat well

It is important to eat and drink the right things. Having a healthy diet helps to keep your heart healthy.

Eat healthy foods

Your body will work best if you eat lots of healthy foods. These are things like:

- fruits and vegetables
- wholegrain foods. This is things like wholemeal bread, brown rice and pasta, and whole grain cereals such as shredded whole wheat biscuits and flakes
- some protein. Protein helps to keep your body strong and healthy. It is in things like chicken, fish, eggs, nuts, beans, peas and lentils.

Eat less fat and sugar

Some types of fat are bad for you. This is fat that is in things like sausages, bacon, butter and pastry. Sugar is in things like sugary drinks, cake, sweets and chocolate.

Eating too much fat and sugar can lead to weight gain. This gives you more chance of having heart disease. We do need foods with a small amount of fat and sugar. It helps our bodies to work properly. You should try to eat healthy fats and sugar instead.

Healthy fats are in foods like olive and rapeseed oil, nuts, seeds, avocados, and fish. Healthy sugars are in foods like milk, natural yoghurts, fruit, and vegetables. You should drink water or have diet or sugar-free drinks.

Eat less salt

Most of the salt we eat comes in the food we buy such as crisps, bacon, sausages, tomato sauce, soy sauce and mustard. Too much salt can cause high blood pressure. You could use herbs and spices instead of salt to flavour your food.

Eat the right amount of food

A healthy diet is not just what you eat, but how much you eat.

The amount of each type of food you eat at 1 time is called a portion.

You can use your hand to work out how big a portion should be:

- your fist is a portion of things like bread, pasta or rice
- your cupped hand is a portion of fruit or vegetables
- your palm is a portion of fish or meat
- your fingertip is a portion of butter
- 2 fingers together is a portion of cheese.

You should make sure you eat the right size portions. This will help to keep you at a healthy weight.

2. Manage your weight

Having a healthy weight can reduce your risk of having a heart attack or stroke. If you need to lose weight, you should try to eat a healthy diet and get more exercise.

3. Manage stress

Most people feel stressed sometimes. Being stressed does not cause heart disease. But it can cause you to do things that are bad for your health. Things like drinking alcohol or smoking a lot. You might find it harder to relax and take a break. It is important to manage your stress to stay healthy.

4. Stop smoking

Giving up smoking is the best thing you can do for your health. If you smoke, you should try to stop as soon as possible. You have less chance of heart disease as soon as you stop smoking. After 1 year of not smoking, your chance of having a heart attack goes down by half.

5. Drink less alcohol

It is best not to drink alcohol at all, if you can. But drinking less alcohol is still an important way to protect your heart and health.

We say that the amount of alcohol in a drink is called a unit. You should try not to drink more than 14 units of alcohol in a week.

14 units is the same as:

- 6 pints of beer or
- 6 small glasses of wine.

You should try to have some days every week when you do not drink alcohol.

6. Move more

Increasing your activity level is good for your body and mind. Moving about can be called being active. Being active is good for your heart and helps to control your blood pressure.

You do not need to go to the gym or run a big race. You can do things you enjoy. Things like walking, dancing, or gardening.

Being active can be anything that makes you:

- breathe harder
- feel warmer
- feel like your heart is beating faster.

You should try to be active for 20 to 30 minutes every day. You could be active for 10 minutes then do a bit more later on.

Contact us

If you have any questions or are worried about heart disease, you can contact us. You can speak to one of our nurses on our Heart Helpline by calling our free phone number 0808 802 1234.

Our helpline is open Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm excluding bank holidays.

You can also visit our website bhf.org.uk to get further information and support.

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