

Helping to protect yourself from heart disease and stroke

| What you probably know | What you might not know | Why? | What you can do |
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| Eating plenty of wholegrains and other fibre rich foods is important for a healthy gut. | The microorganisms in your gut (your gut microbiome) might also influence your risk of heart disease. | The gut microbiome may have beneficial effects on risk factors for heart disease, such as reducing blood cholesterol levels and influencing the immune response. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eat plenty of fruit and vegetables (at least 5 A Day of a variety of types). • Choose high-fibre or wholegrain varieties of starchy carbohydrates wherever possible (wholegrain breakfast cereals, wholegrain breads, wholewheat pasta, brown rice keep the skin on potatoes, go for wholegrain snacks like wholegrain crackers). • Eat plenty of pulses (beans, peas and lentils). |
| Being overweight increases your risk of heart disease or stroke. | Where you carry any excess weight is important in determining the risk of heart disease and stroke | Central adiposity (fat around the stomach) secretes a number of substances (adipokines) that can increase your risk of heart disease. | <p>Regardless of your height or weight, you should try to lose weight if your waist is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 94cm (37ins) or more for most men • 80cm (31.5ins) or more for women <p>You are at very high risk and you should contact your GP if your waist is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 102cm (40ins) or more for men • 88cm (34ins) or more for women |
| Too much salt is linked to high blood pressure, which increases your risk of a heart disease or stroke. | Other minerals, such as magnesium, calcium and potassium, also appear to be important for heart health. | Studies show that these minerals may play a role in preventing hypertension (high blood pressure) and have other positive effects on risk factors for heart disease and stroke. | <p>Include foods that provide:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • potassium (e.g. some fruit and vegetables like parsnips, Brussels sprouts and bananas, potatoes, nuts, seeds, milk, fish, red meat, poultry). • magnesium (e.g. lentils, nuts, seeds and wholegrains). • calcium (e.g. dairy foods, breads, green leafy vegetables and canned fish with bones like sardines). <p>Reduce salt intake to less than 6g/day – that's around 1tsp a day.</p> |
| Eating a healthy diet in pregnancy can influence your baby's growth and development. | Eating a poor diet or being overweight before and during pregnancy can increase your child's risk of becoming obese and developing heart disease and stroke in later life. | Maternal obesity and gestational diabetes (diabetes in pregnancy) influence a baby's size at birth and increase their risk of developing obesity, heart disease and stroke in later life. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ideally aim to enter pregnancy with a healthy body weight (BMI* between 18.5 and 25 kg/m²) and avoid excessive weight gain in pregnancy. • Eat a healthy diet and keep active where possible before and during pregnancy, as well as whilst breastfeeding (see here for more information). |
| We all need a range of vitamins and minerals in our diet to help us stay healthy. | You can't rely on supplements to provide all the vitamins and minerals you need to protect your heart. | A range of vitamins, minerals and bioactives found in a healthy, varied diet may contribute towards reducing risk of heart disease. But studies haven't shown any consistent benefit from popular supplements for prevention of heart disease in Western populations. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make sure you get plenty of vitamins and minerals by eating a varied diet with plenty of plant-based foods (e.g. 5 A Day to provide vitamin C, carotenoids, folate and a range of bioactive compounds). • Eat foods that naturally contain high amounts of vitamin E including vegetable oils, nuts and seeds. • Eat foods that contain B vitamins like wholegrains, dairy foods and fish. • Eat foods that are natural sources of (e.g. oily, fish, eggs), or fortified with vitamin D. |

Developed based on the BNF Task Force report, Cardiovascular Disease: Diet, Nutrition and Emerging Risk Factors: 2nd Edition.

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| Too much saturated fat in your diet is bad for your heart. | What you replace the saturated fat in your diet with is important if you are to decrease your risk of heart disease and stroke. | Replacing saturated fats with unsaturated fats and complex carbohydrates may benefit blood cholesterol and other heart disease and stroke risk factors. Replacing saturated fat with sugar and refined carbohydrates can lead to detrimental effects – it can increase your blood cholesterol, and triglyceride levels, as well as some other heart disease risk factors. | Choose foods that contain a higher proportion of unsaturated fats (polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats) and a lower proportion of saturated fats. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sunflower, corn and walnut oils and spreads made with these, flaxseed, sesame and sunflower seeds, walnuts, pine nuts and oily fish are rich in polyunsaturated fats. Rapeseed and olive oils and spreads made from these, olives, avocados and nuts are rich in monounsaturated fats. Cut back on foods containing free sugars. Choose high fibre foods and those containing wholegrains instead of refined carbohydrates where possible. |
| Getting enough good quality sleep is important for health and wellbeing. | A lack of sleep and interrupted sleep have been linked to increased risk of heart disease and stroke. | Inadequate sleep has been linked to an increased risk of heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, obesity and high blood pressure. Poor quality sleep, when of short duration, has been suggested to further increase the risk. | For general health and wellbeing, aim for between 7 and 9 hours of sleep every night. |
| Drinking alcohol in excess is not good for your health. | Too much alcohol and, in particular, binge drinking, can increase a wide range of heart disease and stroke risk factors. | Heavy or binge drinking is associated with increased likelihood of blood clotting and impaired endothelial function; increased risk of central obesity and increased blood pressure; high blood glucose levels and insulin resistance. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Don't drink more than 14 units of alcohol per week. If you do drink as much as 14 units per week, don't 'save up' the units, but spread them evenly over 3 or more days and have several alcohol-free days a week. |
| Stress is linked to high blood pressure. | Workplace stress increases the risk of heart disease and stroke. | Stress, in particular, job-related pressure and long working hours, has been shown to increase the risk of heart disease and stroke. Exposure to stress is thought to activate specific regions of the brain, leading to an increase in heart rate and blood pressure, which can affect the vessel wall, as well as impair functioning of the lining of blood vessels. | Look into, and practice ways to, manage your own stress that work for you and your lifestyle. |
| Being physically active helps you to keep your heart healthy - people who don't exercise are twice as likely to have a heart attack as those who exercise regularly. | Being sedentary for long periods of time is widely believed to increase the risk of heart disease. Physical activity may reduce, but not eliminate, the increased risk associated with high sitting time. | Regular exercise will make your heart and blood circulatory system more efficient, lower your blood cholesterol level and keep your blood pressure down. It can also have beneficial effects on, inflammatory and adipocyte related factors. Time spent being sedentary is associated with poorer blood lipid profiles, high blood pressure and increased risk of type 2 diabetes. Frequent musculoskeletal contractions throughout the day may help to counteract some of the negative effects of sedentary time. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Make sure that you are doing at least 150 minutes (2½ hours) of moderate intensity activity each week to maintain or improve fitness. Moderate intensity activity typically increases breathing and heart rate to a level where the pulse can be felt and the person feels warmer. Break up long periods spent sitting with periods of walking or standing throughout the day. Minimise the amount of time spent doing sedentary activities, such as watching TV, using the computer, and use active transport where possible. |
| Smoking increases your risk of heart disease and stroke. | Smoking can narrow your arteries and make your blood more likely to clot. | Compounds in cigarette smoke damage the lining of blood vessels and make blood cells more likely to stick together. | Don't start smoking, and if you do smoke, seek help to stop. |