

Preventing heart disease.

Heart disease is the leading cause of worldwide deaths, and yet many of those deaths are preventable. This factsheet looks at major risk factors for cardiovascular disease and provides actionable advice for how to reduce your chances of developing heart and related conditions.



A preventable disease

The World Health Organisation estimates that 80% of premature heart attacks and strokes are preventable. Many of the diseases which fall under the umbrella term heart (or cardiovascular) disease could actually be prevented by a behaviour change among the at-risk population.

Some risk factors that cause heart disease can't be changed, like ethnicity and age, but there are lifestyle changes millions could make that would save lives.

Make a change

High blood pressure, high cholesterol and being overweight or obese are all major risk factors for heart disease, and coronary heart disease in particular, which is the number one cause of deaths worldwide.

Eating a healthy diet, exercising regularly and losing weight if you're overweight are all important steps you can take if you're serious about reducing your risk of getting heart disease.

Set a healthy weight

Being overweight increases your risk of type 2 diabetes, high cholesterol and high blood pressure. All of these are conditions which can lead to heart disease.

Ask your GP or nurse what your ideal weight should be or use an online tool to measure your BMI (body mass index).

Eat for health

- Get your five portions of fruit and vegetables a day: some contain antioxidant vitamins which can prevent fat turning into cholesterol
- Cut down on saturated fat, as this raises bad cholesterol in your blood – that means limiting butter, cream, hard cheese, ghee, meat pies, sausages, cakes and biscuits
- Some foods can help lower cholesterol – including oats, pulses, beans, lentils and Brazil nuts
- Choose fresh foods over ready-made or processed alternatives
- Take care with sugar – too much can cause type 2 diabetes, which increases your risk of developing coronary heart disease

Get moving more

Leading an inactive lifestyle can lead to fatty deposits building up in your arteries, obesity and other serious health conditions.

Taking regular exercise can increase the good cholesterol in your body and help you control your weight. It also reduces your chances of suffering a heart attack. The NHS recommends you take 150 minutes of moderate exercise a week, or 75 minutes of vigorous exercise. Consult with your GP before beginning an exercise regime if you have heart or any other health problems.

Kick your bad habits

Quit smoking

Smoking is one of the biggest risk factors for coronary heart disease. Nicotine makes your heart work faster and increase the likelihood of blood clots. It contributes to hardening of the arteries, known as atherosclerosis.

Quitting smoking isn't easy, but it's one of the most positive steps you can take to reducing your risk of heart disease. Support with giving up the habit is available, via your GP and the NHS online. Your local Smoking Cessation Service is a good place to start: ask your GP for details.

Drink less alcohol

Do you know your recommended weekly units when it comes to alcohol? The government advises drinking no more than 14 units a week. Sticking within your recommended amount of alcohol reduces your risk of certain health problems, including high blood pressure.

Keep an eye on blood pressure

High blood pressure is a major contributor to heart disease. It makes your heart and blood vessels work harder and puts pressure on other organs. High blood pressure increases your risk of other conditions like heart failure, stroke and aortic aneurysms.

Get your blood pressure checked regularly if you think you're at risk. Following the healthy living advice in this factsheet will help to keep your blood pressure under control. Bad diet, smoking, drinking, excess caffeine and stress are all contributors to high blood pressure and therefore heart disease.

In some cases, you'll be prescribed medicine to regulate your blood pressure.



Making small changes to your daily routine can make a big difference to your heart health – which in the long term could save your life.

British Heart Foundation