

Positive steps to a healthy heart

Your heart is a vital organ – it needs care for life.

Everyone can do something to have a healthier heart. Even people who already have coronary heart disease or other heart problems can take positive steps to improve their heart health and reduce their risk of further heart problems.

The best ways to reduce your risk of developing heart disease, and to help prevent it getting worse if you already have it, are to:

- reduce or remove the modifiable risk factors (see below)
- take your medicines as prescribed by your doctor.

Be smoke-free

Smoking is a major risk factor for heart disease. Smoking affects the arteries that supply blood to your heart and other parts of your body. It reduces the amount of oxygen in your blood and damages artery walls. Smoking increases your risk of heart attack, stroke and peripheral arterial disease (which can lead to gangrene and limb amputation).

Tips for quitting

Quitting smoking can be hard at first but, like learning to ride a bike or drive a car, you can do it with planning, practice and help.

Planning

- Set a date for quitting.
- Begin to change your habits.
- Learn how to handle stress and your urges to smoke.
- Think about who and what can help you through the tough times.

Don't give up

Some people slip up after they have quit and start smoking again. Don't see this as a failure. Think about what made you smoke again. How will you deal with this situation next time? What worked and what didn't work? Learn from this and try quitting again.

Seek help

- Talk to your doctor or pharmacist about quitting smoking. They can tell you about the options available to help you to quit, and can help to check your progress.
- Consider nicotine replacement products (nicotine gums, patches or lozenges), or bupropion tablets.
- Talk to family members or friends and ask them for support and encouragement.
- Read self-help materials and attend quit smoking courses.
- Call the Quitline on 13 QUIT for information and advice about quitting smoking.



Enjoy healthy eating

Healthy eating and drinking is an important part of looking after your heart.

- Eat a variety of foods.
- Include vegetables, wholegrains, fruit, nuts and seeds every day.
- Choose healthier fats, lean meat and poultry, and oily fish.
- Try to limit sugary, fatty and salty take-away meals and snacks.
- Drink mainly water.

Not all fat is bad. It's actually good for you to eat a certain amount of fat. Choose healthier unsaturated fats instead of saturated and trans fats to reduce your risk of heart disease. The following foods contain saturated and trans fat and should be limited: fatty and processed meats, full cream dairy products, butter, two vegetable oils (coconut and palm oils), most fried take-away foods and commercially baked biscuits, cakes and pastries.

Use spreads and margarines made from canola, sunflower or olive oil, and dairy blends that have earned the Heart Foundation Tick, instead of butter. Choose reduced fat or no fat dairy products, and always trim the fat from meat before cooking.

Be physically active

The body is designed to move. Regular, moderate-intensity physical activity is good for your heart and is a great way to have fun. Being active can also help to control other risk factors, such as having high blood pressure and being overweight.

The Heart Foundation recommends that you include at least 30 minutes or more of moderate-intensity physical activity (such as brisk walking) on most, if not all, days of the week. The amount of activity can be accumulated in shorter bouts, such as three 10-minute walks.

People with heart disease get the same benefits from regular moderate-intensity physical activity as others do. If you have had a heart attack or stroke, or have been diagnosed with a heart problem, regular moderate-intensity physical activity is a vital part of your return to normal life.

Control your blood pressure and cholesterol

Blood pressure

High blood pressure can strain your heart and speed up the process of coronary heart disease. See your doctor regularly to have your blood pressure checked.

To help to lower your blood pressure, it is important to reduce your excess body weight, be physically active, limit your alcohol intake and adopt a low salt eating pattern.

Ask your doctor for advice. Long-term medicine may be required to manage high blood pressure.



Blood cholesterol

There are two types of blood cholesterol.

Low density lipoprotein (LDL) is also known as 'bad' cholesterol because it can add to the build up of plaque in your arteries and increase your risk of getting coronary heart disease.

High density lipoprotein (HDL) is also known as 'good' cholesterol because it helps to protect you against coronary heart disease.

It's best to aim for a low LDL cholesterol level and a higher HDL cholesterol level. Sometimes having a low HDL cholesterol level can also increase your risk of getting coronary heart disease.

To control your blood cholesterol levels you need to enjoy healthy eating (including eating foods low in saturated fats). You might also need to take medicine to help to control your levels.

If you have any questions about your blood cholesterol levels, talk to your doctor.

Achieve and maintain a healthy body weight

The keys to achieving and maintaining a healthy weight are to enjoy healthy eating and regular physical activity.

To achieve a healthy body weight, balance the energy (kilojoules) coming into your body through food and drinks with the energy (kilojoules) being used up by your body through regular physical activity.

For weight loss to occur, you need to use up more energy (kilojoules) through physical activity and consume less energy (kilojoules) from food and drinks.

Maintain your psychological and social health

Studies have shown that some people who have depression, are socially isolated, or do not have quality social support are at greater risk of developing coronary heart disease.*

Depression can be treated with medical and non-medical therapies. If you think that you have depression, talking to your health professional is the best first step.

* Bunker SJ, Colquhoun DM, Esler MD, et al. Position statement 'Stress' and coronary heart disease: psychosocial risk factors. MJA 2003 178(6): 272-276.



Learn more about heart health

If you'd like to know more about improving your heart health, call our Heart Health Information Service on 1300 36 27 87 (for the cost of a local call) or email heartline@heartfoundation.org.au.

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