

Healthy eating for your heart

In this section we explain how to eat a healthy, balanced diet to help protect your heart. The main points are as follows.

- Eat plenty of fruit and vegetables.
- Choose healthier fats.
- Follow a Mediterranean diet
- Cut down on salt.

We explain more about how to do all these things below.

Eat plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables

Eating a healthy, balanced diet which includes at least five portions of a variety of fruit and vegetables a day will make sure that you get a combination of vitamins and minerals to help keep you healthy.

What you can do

Eat a wide variety of fruit and vegetables. They can be fresh, frozen, chilled, canned, dried, cooked or raw.

There is no evidence that taking vitamin tablets or supplements has the same benefits as eating fruit and vegetables.

Choose healthier fats

Foods containing fat contain a combination of saturated fats, monounsaturated fats and polyunsaturated fats.

Choosing healthier fats can help to protect your heart. But remember that all fats are high in calories. So, if you are watching your weight, you should limit the amount of all the fats you eat.

Cut down on saturated fats such as butter, cheese, sausages and fatty meats, which raise cholesterol levels. Replace them with healthier monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats.

Cut down on foods containing trans fats as they can increase your total cholesterol and LDL cholesterol levels. Trans fats are formed when vegetable oils are 'hydrogenated'. They can be found in processed foods like some cakes, biscuits, crackers and hard margarines.

Foods that have 'hydrogenated oil or fat' or 'partially hydrogenated oil or fat' in the list of ingredients are likely to contain trans fats. Trans fats are also found naturally in very small amounts in dairy foods and meat.

Reduce the total amount of fat you eat by cutting down on foods such as pastries and fatty crisps, and replacing them with healthier fruit and vegetables. Fill up on wholegrain versions of starchy foods instead, such as bread, rice, and pasta.

Choosing healthier fats

To help protect your heart, you need to cut down on saturated fats and trans fats and replace them with monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats. Omega-3 fats are good for your heart too.

Follow a Mediterranean diet

There is evidence that the 'Mediterranean diet' can reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease. A Mediterranean diet incorporates the basics of healthy eating, but it has an emphasis on eating less meat and more fish, fruit, vegetables, grains, nuts, pulses and beans. It also includes using unsaturated oils instead of saturated fats such as butter. Olive oil (a monounsaturated oil) is the most commonly used oil in Mediterranean countries.

It seems that it's the combination of all the different foods – along with the Mediterranean lifestyle and eating pattern that go with it – that provides the heart health benefits.

Aim to eat a couple of portions of fish each week, and make one of these portions an oily fish. Try sardines on toast, or mackerel in a salad, or stir salmon through pasta.

Also, cut down on the foods that provide a lot of saturated fat in your diet – such as full-fat dairy products and butter – and replace them with monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats. See page 42 to find out which foods contain these fats.

Cut down on salt

People who have a lot of salt in their diet are more likely to have high blood pressure. Most people eat far more salt than they need. It is recommended that adults have no more than 6 grams of salt a day – that's about one teaspoonful.

It is the sodium in salt that contributes to high blood pressure. There is sodium in all types of salt, whether it's salt in grains, crystals or flakes.

What you can do

- Cut down on processed foods that contain a lot of salt. Three-quarters of the salt we eat is hidden in processed foods such as ready meals, packet and canned soups, instant noodles, ketchups and sauces, sausages and burgers, and salty savoury snacks.
- Don't add salt to your food at the table.
- Cook without adding any salt. Use extra pepper, herbs, garlic, spices or lemon juice to add flavour to your food instead.

Within a few weeks, your taste buds will change and you will get used to less salt and appreciate other flavours more.

Other things you can do

Alcohol

If you drink alcohol, make sure you drink within the recommended limits and avoid binge-drinking. It is better to have just a small amount regularly rather than large amounts in one go.

Moderate drinking – 1 or 2 units of alcohol a day – may offer some protection from coronary heart disease for some people. However, **if you don't already drink alcohol, there is no need for you to start, as there are much healthier ways to look after your heart.**

Drinking more than the recommended limit does not protect the heart and can lead to damage to the heart muscle, high blood pressure, stroke and some cancers. Alcohol is high in calories too, so it can lead to weight gain.

Reducing stress

Challenges can help to keep us motivated, but when we feel unable to cope with the high demands that are placed on us, we experience stress. Feeling isolated can make you feel even more stressed.

The way you deal with stress can encourage unhealthy behaviour, such as smoking, drinking too much alcohol, eating unhealthily or being less physically active. These can all increase your risk of developing cardiovascular disease.

It's important to learn how to relax and deal with stress effectively. Here are some tips to help.

- Try to identify situations that make you feel stressed, and avoid them if you can.
- Be realistic about what you can achieve and learn to say 'no' to unnecessary demands.
- Doing something active – such as going for a brisk walk or a run – can help you let off steam.
- Try relaxation techniques or join a yoga class.
- If you feel overwhelmed, talk to a friend or a partner, or ask your GP for advice.

Family history

If you have a family history of certain cardiovascular diseases such as coronary heart disease or stroke, you may have an increased risk of developing that particular disease yourself.

A family history means if your father, mother, brother or sister developed coronary heart disease or had a stroke at a young age (under 65 for women, and under 55 for men).

Family behaviour can be a factor too. Lifestyle habits, such as a poor diet or smoking, can sometimes be passed on in families.

Genes may also play a role in the risk of developing coronary heart disease or having a stroke, although more research is needed to understand this.

No single gene has been identified as being responsible, and it is likely that several genes may have a role. There is no genetic test available to find out if the risk of coronary heart disease and stroke runs in families.

What you can do

If cardiovascular disease runs in your family, you need to make an extra effort to reduce your other risk factors. It's vital to control your weight, eat healthily, take regular physical activity and avoid smoking.

Tell your doctor if you have a family history of cardiovascular disease, as he or she may want to check your blood pressure or carry out a health check. You can't change your family background, but you can choose your lifestyle!