



Five ways to look after your heart

Taking steps to protect your heart health can help to minimise your risk of developing cardiovascular disease.

What is cardiovascular disease?

Cardiovascular disease, also known as 'CVD', covers a range of conditions that affect the heart and circulation. The most common of these are a **heart attack** and **stroke**.

What can cause a heart attack or stroke?

A **heart attack** occurs when the blood supply to the heart muscle is suddenly blocked. Usually this is caused by a blood clot. The lack of blood supply can seriously damage the heart muscle and can cause part of the muscle to die.

A **stroke** happens when the blood supply to part of the brain is cut off. Commonly this is down to a blood clot, but it can also be caused by a burst blood vessel. This can mean brain cells become damaged or die.

What are the risk factors?

Common risk factors associated with cardiovascular disease include a lack of physical activity, smoking, obesity and drinking harmful amounts of alcohol. High cholesterol, diabetes and high blood pressure are also linked to an increased risk.

How to reduce your risk

Although cardiovascular disease is on the rise, there is much you can do to help reduce your risk of a heart attack or stroke. Below are some key lifestyle choices you can make to help support your heart health.

- **Keep physically active** – The NHS recommends at least 150 minutes of moderate aerobic activity every week. Try to break up long periods of being stationary with stretches or walking.
- **Eat a healthy diet** – Include plenty of fibre, complex carbohydrates, fruit, vegetables and oily fish. Try to minimise levels of fat, sugar and salt. It's also key to keep your body hydrated – which will also help to control hunger.
- **Manage your alcohol intake** – To keep within the lower-risk limit, drink no more than 14 units per week, spread across various days.
- **Avoid tobacco use** – This also includes exposure to second-hand tobacco smoke.
- **Manage stress in a healthy way** – Stress is linked to unhealthy habits that can increase your risk. Mindfulness, physical exercise and talking to others are some activities that can help to relieve stress. Find out more ways to manage stress on the [NHS website](#).

Following these five tips will not only support your heart, but your overall physical and mental health. They can also help to normalise your blood pressure and cholesterol levels, helping to reduce key risk factors of cardiovascular disease.

Are you eligible for an NHS Health Check?

If you're aged 40-74 and haven't had a stroke or suffered from heart disease, diabetes or kidney disease, you'll be offered a free [NHS Health Check](#) every five years.

During your appointment, a nurse at your GP surgery will measure your height, weight and blood pressure. A blood sample will also be taken to check your cholesterol and glucose levels.

The NHS Health Check is a great way to proactively look after your health. In its first five years of being rolled out, it's estimated to have prevented 2,500 heart attacks or strokes.

Further support

[British Heart Foundation](#) – Resources covering heart and circulatory diseases.

[Age UK](#) – Ways to boost your heart health.