

Looking After Your Heart

If you've been given this leaflet you have probably asked for some advice about looking after your health or asked for your cholesterol or blood pressure to be checked.

We have tried to summarise the most important things you need to know to look after your heart and health for future years. Diseases of the circulation caused by "furring up" of the arteries (for example heart attacks and strokes) are one of the commonest causes of serious illness and death in this country and a great deal is now known about what causes them and what you can do to reduce your chances of having problems in the future. **The most important things are how you look after yourself** - what you eat, how much you exercise and if you smoke. There are also things you might get checked at the doctor's - like blood pressure and cholesterol.

Diet

- Watch your fats

Fatty foods tend to make you put on weight and in particular saturated fats (found in dairy products and meat) are thought to be most likely to contribute to furring up of the arteries. The best thing is to keep fatty foods to a minimum and try and replace saturated fats with healthier polyunsaturates found in margarine, olive oil, sunflower oil.

- Fruit and Vegetables

The more the better! The World Health Organisation currently recommends 5 portions a day of fresh fruit or vegetables. A "portion" is about a handful size of any fruit or vegetables or a glass of fruit juice.

- Oily Fish

Some fish contain lots of a certain group of fats called "Omega-3" fats. These have a beneficial effect on the circulation. In one study done in Scotland, eating 2 portions of oily fish a week was nearly as effective as cholesterol lowering drugs at preventing heart attacks. The fish with Omega-3 fats include: Herring, kippers, mackerel, pilchards, sardines, tuna, trout, anchovies and salmon.

- The Mediterranean Diet

This diet which is similar to the advice above involves eating more bread, fruit, vegetables and fish but less meat. Butter and cream should be replaced with margarine. One trial of this diet - in people who already had heart disease, showed a 50% reduction in death over just 2 years in those eating a Mediterranean diet!

- Alcohol

It is thought that small amounts of alcohol taken regularly help prevent heart attacks and strokes as alcohol thins the blood slightly. The recommended amount is about 2 units of alcohol a day (1 unit is 125ml of wine, half a pint normal beer or lager or one measure of spirits). However, too much alcohol can put up your blood pressure and make you put on weight so don't go overboard!

- Weight

Being overweight increases your chances of developing diabetes and diseases of the circulation. The only reliable way to really lose weight permanently is to eat less- especially fatty and high carbohydrate foods and exercise more. The best way is to make gradual changes that you will be able to keep up *for good*. Yo-yo dieting is no good in the long run.

Smoking

Don't do it!!

Smoking is probably the worst thing you can do for your health and it is especially damaging to the arteries. The good news is that stopping smoking very quickly reduces your risk of circulatory disease- some studies have shown by up to 50% after just 2 years of stopping.

If you smoke, the single most important thing you can do for your health is to stop smoking. It is never too late, no matter how old you are or how long you've been smoking.

The Surgery runs a "Support to Stop Smoking" Clinic where our nurses can advise you about how to quit and support you through the process as well as prescribing nicotine replacement therapy if this is suitable for you. Just ask at reception for details.

Exercise

Exercise is good for you!

Most of us could do with doing more exercise. There is no doubt that fitter more active people have less chance of running into heart problems. The good news is that you don't have to spend an hour in the gym every day or be able to run a marathon. The more exercise the better, but just 20 minutes 3 times a week of any activity which raises your pulse rate or makes you sweat a little gives plenty of aerobic exercise to keep the heart healthy. This could be just brisk walking if you can't manage running. Cycling or swimming can be easier forms of exercise for those who can't face jogging!

Keeping generally more active in day to day life is important too - take stairs instead of lifts, walk as much as possible rather than drive for short journeys.

Blood pressure

Many people, usually after the age of 50 develop high blood pressure. No-one really know why this happens but blood pressure which remains high over many years damages the arteries and increases your chances of heart attacks and strokes.

How high is high?

Ideally blood pressure should be less than 160/90 if you're otherwise fit and well. If you have diabetes or already have heart problems, then we'd recommend a lower limit.

Often someone's blood pressure will be high on one day and low the next. Short term rises in blood pressure are nothing to worry about- it's really if it stays high on a number of occasions that it becomes a problem.

You can help keep your blood pressure down by:

- Loosing weight if you need to
- Keeping alcohol within sensible limits (21 units per week for men, 14 for women)
- Avoiding excessive salt in the diet. This just means not adding salt to your meals or cooking.
- Exercise

If your blood pressure is normal you only need to have it checked every couple of years or so.

Cholesterol

Cholesterol is a kind of fat which circulates in the blood. It does lots of useful things around the body but high cholesterol levels encourage the build up of fatty deposits on the arteries.

Blood tests can find out your cholesterol levels. They measure both “good” and “bad” cholesterol levels. This can be quite confusing! Basically the “good” cholesterol (called HDL cholesterol) is taking itself away from your arteries and back to the liver where it’s supposed to be. The “bad” cholesterol (called LDL cholesterol) tends to stick to the arteries. Having high levels of “good” cholesterol actually protects you from furring up of the arteries. This is why some people who have quite high overall cholesterol are OK if their HDL levels are good.

It’s important to remember that cholesterol is only a small part of the picture - often people will worry about cholesterol being slightly high, but if other aspects of your health are good (as described in this leaflet) then there’s usually no cause for concern and cholesterol needn’t be checked more often than every 5 years,if at all.

Healthy eating can keep cholesterol levels down but often doesn’t make a huge difference, Having said that, healthy eating is good for you in it’s own right whatever your cholesterol is.

If you have had a blood test for cholesterol at the surgery and are not due to come to the Diabetes clinic or Smart Heart Clinic, then please phone one week after the blood test and ask for a “Telephone Consultation” with a doctor to discuss the result and whether it needs to be checked again.

Aspirin

You may have heard that taking aspirin every day can prevent heart attacks or strokes. This is true and most people who’ve had such problems take a small aspirin tablet daily. However, aspirin can cause stomach ulcers which occasionally can be dangerous so if you’re not especially at risk of heart problems then the risks may outweigh the benefits. Please talk to your doctor if you’re thinking about taking aspirin. Basically, if you are fit and well it’s unlikely that taking aspirin daily would be a good idea for you.

Further information can be found on the British Heart Foundation website

www.bhf.org.uk