

REDUCING THE RISK

OF HEART DISEASE AND STROKE

Chest
Heart &
Stroke
Scotland



ESSENTIAL GUIDE

This Essential Guide is about reducing your risk of heart disease and stroke.

It explains:

- What cardiovascular disease is
- What the risk factors are
- How you can reduce your risk
- What support is available to help you reduce your risk

Cardiovascular disease

Cardiovascular disease is the general term used to describe conditions that affect your heart and blood vessels.

Your blood vessels carry blood around your body to deliver the oxygen and nutrients your body needs.

A problem with your blood vessels can mean that organs such as your heart or brain don't get the blood they need to do their job properly.

Heart disease and stroke are two common examples of cardiovascular disease.

What is heart disease?

Heart disease is the name given to a number of health conditions that affect your heart. These include conditions that affect your heart muscle, the valves in your heart and how your heart beats.

Coronary heart disease is the most common type of heart disease. This is caused by a build-up of fatty patches in your arteries. The fatty patches narrow or block your arteries and can lead to heart problems such as angina (chest pain), heart attack or heart failure. They can also lead to a stroke.



What is a stroke?

There are two types of stroke. The most common type occurs when the blood supply to part of your brain is blocked off, usually by a blood clot. This stops oxygen and nutrients getting to the cells in that part of the brain. This can cause the cells to become damaged or die. The second type of stroke is caused by bleeding in or around your brain due to a burst blood vessel.

The effects of a stroke depend on:

- The type of stroke
- The area of the brain that has been affected
- How much damage has occurred



Risk factors for heart disease and stroke

Things that increase your likelihood of developing cardiovascular disease are called 'cardiovascular risk factors'.

Many of the risk factors for heart disease and stroke are the same.

Some risk factors you cannot change. These include your:

Age – the older you are, the higher your risk

Family history – if a close family member has had any form of cardiovascular disease, such as a heart attack or stroke, your risk is higher

Ethnicity – if you are from a black African, African-Caribbean or Asian background, your risk is higher

Other risk factors relate to your lifestyle and health conditions you may already have. There are things you can do to help manage these risk factors and lower your risk of developing heart disease and stroke.

The more risk factors you have, the higher your risk of heart disease and stroke.

Understanding your risk factors and what action you can take to reduce your risk is important for everyone:

If you don't have heart disease or have never had a stroke, taking action now will lower your risk of developing heart disease or having a stroke in the future. This is called primary prevention.

If you already have heart disease or have had a stroke, taking action now will lower the risk of your heart disease getting worse, or having another stroke in the future. This is called secondary prevention.

What you can do to lower your risk

There are lots of things you can do to help lower your risk of heart disease and stroke.

These include:

Attending regular health checks



Managing existing health conditions



Managing your medication



Making healthy lifestyle choices



Getting help to take action and make changes



Call our Advice Line FREE on 0808 801 0899

Attend regular health checks

- Some health conditions that increase your risk of heart disease and stroke have no obvious signs or symptoms and so it is important to attend a regular health check called a 'cardiovascular risk assessment'.
- During the assessment you will be asked about your lifestyle, such as if you exercise or if you smoke. Your blood pressure and weight will be checked. Blood tests may also be needed to check your cholesterol level and test for diabetes.
- How often you have an assessment depends on your age, any existing health conditions, medication you may be taking, your family history and your ethnicity.

Speak to your doctor, nurse or pharmacist about how often you should have a cardiovascular risk assessment.

Manage existing health conditions

Some health conditions can greatly increase your risk of heart disease and stroke. These include:

- High blood pressure (hypertension)
- High cholesterol
- Atrial fibrillation
- Diabetes

Being overweight or obese can also increase your risk.

Managing existing health conditions is important to help reduce your risk of heart disease and stroke.



High blood pressure

High blood pressure increases your risk of heart disease and stroke. This is because your heart has to work harder than it should to pump blood around your body.

High blood pressure often does not have any symptoms. Your risk of developing high blood pressure also increases as you get older. For these reasons, it is important to have your blood pressure checked regularly.

If you have high blood pressure, you may be prescribed medication.

Making healthy lifestyle changes can also help to lower your blood pressure. If your blood pressure is normal, making healthy lifestyle changes can help to prevent high blood pressure in the future.

High cholesterol

Cholesterol is a fatty substance mainly produced in your liver. It is also found in foods like red meat, full-fat dairy products and processed foods.

A blood test is needed to check your cholesterol level. If you have high cholesterol it means you are at increased risk of heart disease and stroke.

You may be prescribed a medicine called statins to help lower your cholesterol. If you are at higher risk of heart disease or stroke, your doctor may prescribe statins, even if your cholesterol level is normal.

One of the most important things you can do to help lower your cholesterol is to **cut down on saturated fat** in your diet. Other things that help include being physically active, stopping smoking, eating a healthy, balanced diet and limiting your alcohol intake.

Atrial fibrillation

Atrial fibrillation (AF) is a common condition that causes your heart to beat in an irregular way. AF increases your risk of heart disease and stroke. Your risk of developing AF increases as you get older.

People with atrial fibrillation are 5 times more likely to have a stroke.

AF can make you feel dizzy, light-headed, tired, weak, confused or short of breath. It can also cause chest pain or discomfort and palpitations (when your heart feels like it's pounding, fluttering or beating irregularly). However, **symptoms of AF are not always obvious** and many people do not know they have it.

If you notice a sudden change in your heartbeat or have chest pain, you should always seek urgent medical advice.

Diabetes

Your body needs the hormone insulin to use and store glucose. Glucose comes from carbohydrates in your food and is used by your body for energy.

Diabetes is caused by problems with your insulin. This results in too much glucose in your blood. Diabetes increases your risk of heart disease, stroke and other health conditions such as kidney disease.

There are 2 main types of diabetes:

Type 1 diabetes is more commonly diagnosed in children and young people and is not related to lifestyle.

Type 2 diabetes is linked to lifestyle. In particular, it is linked to problems with weight and obesity. With the right treatment and lifestyle changes, Type 2 diabetes can be managed well.

Symptoms of diabetes include:

Being very thirsty



Going to the toilet a lot, especially at night



Feeling more tired than usual



Losing weight without trying to



Blurred vision



Itching around your penis or vagina



Slow healing of cuts or wounds



If you think you have any of the symptoms of diabetes, it is important to see your doctor as soon as possible.

Manage your medication

You may be prescribed medication to help treat any existing health conditions. It is important to discuss with your doctor what medication is right for you. If you notice any side effects, speak to your doctor about whether different medicine is available that might be better for you.

If you have already had a stroke or transient ischaemic attack (TIA), your doctor may prescribe medication to help reduce your risk of having another one. In some cases, surgery may also be recommended.

It is important to always take medications exactly as prescribed. If you find that managing your medications is difficult, ask your doctor or pharmacist for advice.

Make healthy lifestyle choices

Making healthy lifestyle choices can greatly reduce your risk of developing heart disease and having a stroke. Even small changes and making changes slowly over time can help to reduce your risk and improve your health.

Things you can do to help to reduce your risk include:

- Eating a healthy, balanced diet
- Stopping smoking
- Managing your weight
- Being physically active
- Limiting your alcohol intake
- Managing your mental wellbeing

Eat a healthy, balanced diet

Eating a healthy, balanced diet can help to reduce your risk of heart disease, stroke and other health conditions.

Base your meals on starchy foods (carbohydrates) like rice, potatoes or pasta - try to choose wholegrain, high-fibre varieties

Aim to eat at least 5 portions of different fruit and vegetables each day

Eat more beans and pulses and less red and processed meat

Aim to eat at least 2 portions of fish a week, 1 of which should be oily fish like mackerel

Limit saturated fat, salt and sugar

Drink 6-8 glasses of non-alcoholic fluid each day*

*Speak to your GP about your fluid intake if you are on a fluid-restricted diet

A '**Mediterranean diet**' is recommended if you have cardiovascular disease or have a high risk of developing cardiovascular disease.

A Mediterranean diet means:

Eating lots of vegetables, fruit and whole grains



Replacing saturated fat with unsaturated fats such as olive oil



Limiting red meat



Too much salt, sugar, saturated fat and trans fats can increase your risk of heart disease and stroke. Reducing these in your diet helps to lower the risks.



Stop smoking

Stopping smoking is one of the best things you can do for your health.

Smoking **greatly increases** your risk of having a stroke and developing heart disease and other serious health conditions such as cancer and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).



You are 4 times more likely to quit smoking with professional support and medication.

There is lots of free support available to help you stop smoking. Ask your doctor, nurse or pharmacist for information or call **Quit Your Way Scotland** on **0800 848 484**.

Manage your weight

If you are overweight, your heart has to work harder to pump blood around your body. Extra weight can also lead to a build-up of fatty material in your arteries and fat around your essential organs.

Being overweight or obese increases your risk of heart disease, stroke and other health conditions. Losing weight can reduce these risks.

Your body changes the calories in what you eat and drink into energy. If you eat or drink more calories than your body uses, the leftover calories are stored as fat. This means you will put on weight. To lose weight, you have to eat and drink fewer calories than your body uses.

Combining a healthy, balanced diet with physical activity is the most effective way to lose weight and keep it off.

Be physically active

Regular physical activity can reduce your risk of heart disease and stroke by up to 35%.



Physical activity can be as simple as walking, gardening or shopping, or exercise like swimming, playing football or jogging.



Aim for at least **150 minutes** (2 ½ hours) of moderate physical activity a week. This could be 30 minutes on 5 or more days, or a few sessions each day of 10 minutes at a time.



Moderate physical activity is activity that makes you feel a little out of breath but you are still able to talk.



Aim to also do strength exercises on 2 or more days a week.

Strength exercises don't have to be in a gym - just carrying your shopping counts.



If you have a medical condition, speak to your doctor, nurse or specialist about what kind of activity you can do. If you have difficulty moving or you use a wheelchair, ask about exercise classes in your area that might be right for you.

Limit your alcohol intake

Alcohol increases your risk of developing heart disease, stroke and other health conditions such as diabetes, chest conditions, liver disease and cancer.

Regularly drinking more than the recommended limit puts you at 3 times higher risk of having a stroke.

You can lower your risk by staying within the recommended limit.

The recommended limit for men and women is **not regularly drinking more than 14 units of alcohol a week.**

If you do drink 14 units a week, spread them out over 3 days or more.

For advice on how to reduce your alcohol intake go to www.drinkaware.co.uk or phone Drinkline for free on **0300 123 1110**.

One unit is the same as:



218ml

Standard
4.5% cider



76ml

Standard
13% wine



25ml

Standard
40% whisky



250ml

Standard
4% beer



250ml

Standard
4% alcopop

Recreational drug use



Drugs such as cocaine, cannabis, ketamine, and amphetamines like speed, are linked with an increased risk of heart attack and stroke. For information and confidential advice about your drug use or someone else's visit www.talktofrank.com or call **0300 123 6600**.

Manage your mental wellbeing

Your mental wellbeing is about how you feel and how well you cope with everyday life.

Good mental wellbeing is linked to many health benefits including having better physical health and a healthier lifestyle.

Stress, anxiety and feeling down or isolated can affect your physical health. They can also lead to unhealthy behaviours that increase your risk of heart disease and stroke, such as drinking too much alcohol or eating unhealthy food.



There are lots of things you can do to help with your mental wellbeing. These include:

- Spending time with others



- Getting out and about and being physically active



- Getting enough sleep



- Making healthy lifestyle choices



- Avoiding alcohol



- Using relaxation techniques



- Being mindful and more aware of the 'here and now'



Tips for making changes to your lifestyle

- Break big goals down into smaller ones.
- Set small, achievable targets. Don't try to change everything at once!
- Be specific. Instead of saying, "I'm going to exercise more", think about how you will do this. For example, "I'm going to get off the bus three stops early and walk the rest of the way home."





- Get support from a friend, family member or group.
- Look for different signs of progress. For example, how your clothes fit, how much energy you have, how relaxed you feel.
- Celebrate achievements, no matter how small.
- Don't give up! Everyone slips up every now and again. That's OK. If you do, accept it and try to get back on track as soon as possible.

Help and support to reduce your risk

Getting support to reduce your risk of heart disease and stroke can help you make changes and stick to them.

Check your local gym, leisure centre or library for information on exercise and 'living well' classes in your local area. Your doctor, nurse or pharmacist can also give you advice and support to help manage existing health conditions and make healthy lifestyle changes.

The **Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland Advice Line nurses** can give you more information on reducing your risk. Other guides in our Essential Guides series also provide more detailed information on each of the topics discussed here. To access the guides, go to **www.chss.org.uk/publications** or ask the Advice Line nurses for more information.

Call our Advice Line FREE on 0808 801 0899

Notes

Notes on what I can do to reduce my risk or questions for my health professional.

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Our publications are available for free to anyone in Scotland who needs them. Go to **www.chss.org.uk/publications** for all our resources, including other Essential Guides in this series.

For free, confidential advice and support from our **Advice Line nurses**, call: 0808 801 0899 (Mon-Fri 9.30am-4pm), text: NURSE to 66777 or email: adviceline@chss.org.uk.

Across Scotland, over one million people – that's one in five of us – are living with the effects of a chest, heart or stroke condition. We are here to help everyone who needs us. But we need your support to do this. Go to **www.chss.org.uk/supportus** to find out how you can help more people in Scotland.

If you would like this resource in an alternative format, please contact our Advice Line nurses.

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NO LIFE HALF LIVED

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