

# REDUCING THE RISK

OF HEART DISEASE AND STROKE

Chest  
Heart &  
Stroke  
Scotland



ESSENTIAL GUIDE

# **This Essential Guide is about reducing your risk of cardiovascular disease.**

**It explains:**

- What cardiovascular disease is
- What the risk factors are
- How you can reduce your risk
- What support is available to 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 that your body needs.

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

There are many different types of cardiovascular disease. **Heart disease** and **stroke** are two common examples, and the focus of this booklet.

However, the information in this booklet applies to other forms of cardiovascular disease, as well.

# What is heart disease?

**Heart disease** is the name given to a number of health conditions that affect your heart.

This includes conditions affecting heart muscle, the valves of the heart, and how the heart beats.

**Coronary heart disease** (CHD) is the most common type of heart disease. CHD is caused by a build-up of fatty patches in your arteries. These plaques of fat narrow or block your arteries.

If arteries leading to your heart are blocked, this can cause angina (chest pain), heart attack, or heart failure. If arteries leading to your brain are blocked, this can cause a **stroke**.



# What is a stroke?

There are two types of stroke.

The most common type of stroke - **ischaemic** (is-KEE-mic) stroke - occurs when the blood supply to part of your brain is blocked, usually by a blood clot or fatty plaque. This stops oxygen and nutrients from reaching the cells in that part of the brain. Not having enough oxygen and nutrients damages the cells, and can even kill them.

The second type of stroke - **haemorrhagic** (hem-more-ajic) 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 affected area of the brain
- How much damage has occurred
- How "FAST" you get medical help



# Cardiovascular risk factors

Things that increase your likelihood of developing heart disease or stroke are called “**cardiovascular risk factors**”. These are often the same between conditions.

Some risk factors are things 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** - people from black African, Afro-Caribbean, or Asian backgrounds are at higher risk of cardiovascular disease.

**Other conditions** - some long-term health conditions, like diabetes or heart murmur, increase your risk even when managed.

Other risk factors relate to your lifestyle. 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 actions you can take to reduce your risk is important for everyone:**

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

If you have already had a stroke or have heart disease, taking action now will lower the risk of your heart disease getting worse, or of you suffering 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 and getting regular vaccinations



Managing your medication



Making healthy lifestyle choices



Getting help to take action and make changes

# Attending regular health checks

Some health conditions that increase your risk of heart disease and stroke have no obvious signs or symptoms, so it is important to attend a regular health check called a **cardiovascular risk assessment**.

During the assessment you will be asked questions about your lifestyle, like how much you exercise or whether you smoke.

Your blood pressure and weight will be checked. You may also need blood tests to check your cholesterol level and test for diabetes.

How often you should 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 to find out how often you should be assessed.**

# Managing 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
- Heart abnormalities

The next few pages discuss some of these conditions in more detail.

**Managing existing health conditions is an important part of reducing 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. It also places more physical strain on your blood vessels.

High blood pressure often has no symptoms. Your risk of developing high blood pressure increases as you age. For both these reasons, it is important to have your blood pressure checked regularly.

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

Making healthy lifestyle changes to your diet, habits, and daily routine can also help to lower your blood pressure or to prevent high pressure in the future.

# High cholesterol

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

Your cholesterol level can be checked with a blood test. If you have high cholesterol, the risk of heart disease and stroke is higher.

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

One of the most important ways 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 in which your heart beats in an irregular way. AF increases your risk of heart disease and stroke.

Your risk of developing AF increases with age.

**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 also 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

The hormone **insulin** is produced by your body, and lets you 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, leaving too much glucose in your blood. Diabetes increases your risk of heart disease and stroke, and also other conditions like kidney disease.

There are two main types of diabetes:

**Type 1 diabetes** is not related to lifestyle. It is most commonly diagnosed in children and young people. It can be treated with regular insulin injections and monitoring.

**Type 2 diabetes** is linked to lifestyle, especially diet and weight. With the right treatment and lifestyle changes, Type 2 diabetes can be managed well.

## Symptoms of diabetes include:



Being very thirsty



Peeing 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



Tingling in fingers and toes

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

# Managing your medication

You may have been prescribed medication for 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 or (in some cases) surgery to help reduce your risk of having another one.

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

# Making healthy lifestyle choices

Making healthy lifestyle choices can greatly reduce your risk of developing heart disease or stroke.

Even small, slow changes over time can help to reduce your risk and improve your overall health.

## **Things that can reduce your risk include:**

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

# Eating a healthy, balanced diet

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

If you have cardiovascular disease or are at a high risk of cardiovascular disease, evidence recommends a **"Mediterranean diet"**:



Eating lots of vegetables, fruit, and whole grains



Replacing saturated fats with unsaturated fats like olive oil



Limiting red meat and replacing it with fish

**Too much salt, sugar, and saturated or trans fat can increase your risk of heart disease or stroke. Adjusting your diet can counter this.**

# Managing your weight

Extra weight has many effects on your body. It:

- makes your heart work harder to pump blood around your body
- causes a build-up of fat in arteries and around essential organs
- increases stress on your body

Being overweight or obese increases your risk of heart disease, stroke, and other health conditions.

Being underweight or losing weight too fast can also weaken your body and cause a temporary increase in the risk of a heart attack or haemorrhagic stroke.

You should find out what is a healthy weight for you and try to stay within that range.

**You can best maintain a healthy weight by combining a healthy, balanced diet with physical activity.**

# 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.



Aim for at least 150 minutes (30 minutes on 5 or more days) of moderate physical activity a week.



Moderate physical activity is activity that makes you feel out of breath, but you should still be able to talk.



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

**If you have a medical condition, speak to a health professional about what kind of activity is best for you. Do not keep doing exercise if it hurts or causes discomfort.**

# Stopping smoking

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



Smoking **greatly increases** your risk of stroke and heart disease, as well as other serious health conditions like cancer and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).

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

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

# Limit your alcohol intake

Alcohol increases your risk of developing heart disease, stroke, and other conditions like diabetes, liver disease, and cancer.

Regularly drinking over the recommended limit **triples your risk of stroke**.

You can lower your risk by staying within the recommended limit of **14 units of alcohol a week** (for both men and women) and spreading your drinking out over several days.

For advice on how to reduce your alcohol intake, go to **[www.drinkaware.co.uk](http://www.drinkaware.co.uk)** or call Drinkline free on **0300 123 1110**.

## Recreational drug use



Drugs like cocaine, cannabis, and ketamine are linked to an increased cardiovascular risk.

For information and confidential advice about drug use, visit **[www.talktofrank.com](http://www.talktofrank.com)** or call **0300 123 6600**.

# Managing your mental wellbeing

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

Stress, anxiety, and feeling down or isolated can affect your mental and physical health. They can also lead to behaviours which increase your cardiovascular risk, like drinking too much alcohol or avoiding exercise.

## **You can improve your mental wellbeing by:**

- Getting out and about, and being physically active.
- Spending time with others.
- Getting enough sleep and using relaxation techniques.
- Making healthy diet choices and limiting alcohol.
- Being mindful and 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 specific things you could do. For example, "I'm going to get off the bus early and walk the rest of the way home".



Get support from a friend, family member, or support group.



Talk to other people in your situation, who may have tips, tricks, and ideas to help you.



Look for different signs of progress - for example, how your clothes fit, how much energy you have, or how relaxed you feel.



Celebrate achievements, no matter how small.



Don't give up! Everyone slips up now and then. That's OK. What matters is that you accept it and keep trying.



# Help and support to reduce your risk

Getting support from others can help you to make changes and stick to them.

Check your local gym, library, or leisure centre 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.

Tell your friends and families what you’re trying to change in your life. They can help to keep you accountable.

Look for local support with specific changes, like stopping smoking or losing weight.

Call our Advice Line FREE on 0808 801 0899

The **Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland AdviceLine** nurses can give you more information on reducing your risk of heart disease and stroke.

You can contact them at **0808 801 0899**, or email **advice@chss.org.uk**.

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 AdviceLine nurses for more information.



Our publications are free to everyone in Scotland, in PDF and in print. See them all at [www.chss.org.uk/resources-hub](http://www.chss.org.uk/resources-hub)

For free, confidential advice and support from our Advice Line Team, contact:

**0808 801 0899 (Mon-Fri 9am-4pm)**

**text ADVICE to 66777**

**[advice@chss.org.uk](mailto:advice@chss.org.uk)**

One in five people in Scotland are affected by chest, heart and stroke conditions or Long Covid. Go to [www.chss.org.uk/supportus](http://www.chss.org.uk/supportus) to find out how you can help us support more people in Scotland.

To give feedback or request alternative formats, email: [health.information@chss.org.uk](mailto:health.information@chss.org.uk)

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