

Heart matters: how do you look after your heart?

With February marking National Heart Month and the launch of a new stroke awareness campaign^{1, 2}, there has never been a better time to learn more about looking after your heart. Cardiovascular disease (CVD) covers a wide array of disorders, including diseases of the cardiac muscle and of the vascular system supplying the heart, brain, and other vital organs. The most common manifestations of CVD are heart attacks, congestive heart failure, and stroke.

Risk factors for CVD

Lifestyle factors can impact a person's risk of developing CVD. Modifying the following risk factors can reduce the risk of heart attacks, stroke, and other cardiovascular conditions³:

- **Smoking:** Smoking is the most preventable risk factor for CVD and stroke. Smokers have more than twice the risk of a heart attack than nonsmokers. Even 1-2 cigarettes a day greatly increases the risk of all CVD. Nonsmokers who are exposed to constant smoke also have an increased risk⁴.
- **Cholesterol:** Excessive lipids (or fatty substances), especially in the form of low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol, cause the build-up of fatty deposits within the arteries, reducing or blocking the flow of blood and oxygen to the heart. In the UK, NICE recommends total cholesterol levels <5.0mmol/l (200mg/dl), with LDL <3.0mmol/l (130 mg/dl).
- **High blood pressure:** Blood pressure (BP) is the force exerted inside the arteries with each heartbeat. High BP (or hypertension) increases the workload of the heart and kidneys, increasing the risk of heart attack, heart failure and kidney disease. Hypertension is the largest

risk factor for stroke. BP should be 120/80 mmHg or lower.

- **Diabetes:** Diabetes occurs when the body is unable to produce insulin or use the insulin it has. This results in elevated blood glucose levels. People with diabetes have a higher risk of CVD because diabetes increases other risk factors, e.g. LDL cholesterol and BP. Keeping diabetes under control is important for preventing cardiovascular disease.
- **Overweight and obesity:** The higher a person's body mass index (BMI; height/weight ratio), the harder the heart has to work. Being overweight contributes to the onset of CVD and also raises cholesterol, BP, and increases the risk of diabetes. A healthy BMI (19-25) can be achieved with exercise and diet.
- **Exercise:** Exercising helps improve how well the heart pumps blood through the body. Moderate exercise for 30 minutes a day, on most days, is recommended⁵.
- **Diet:** High cholesterol, hypertension, diabetes and obesity can all be modified by diet. It is recommended that we limit foods high in sodium (salt), saturated fat, cholesterol, trans fat (partially hydrogenated fats) and refined sugars.



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In the Journals

Appearance concerns and attitudes to smoking

1 Smoking initiation and maintenance in young people is thought to be influenced by the desire to look attractive.

2 The study investigated how young men and women smokers and non-smokers talk about the impact of smoking on appearance, with the aim of using these accounts to inform anti-smoking campaigns targeted at young people.

3 87 men and women aged 16-24 participated in 24 focus groups and were asked to talk about the impact of smoking on appearance.

4 Thematic analysis of transcripts showed that weight gain after quitting was a concern for younger women only. Smokers also believed that smoking made them look 'cool' and mature and would quit only if skin ageing and other negative effects on appearance become visible.

5 Both male and female non-smokers were concerned about yellowing of teeth and skin if they started smoking. Female non-smokers were concerned about skin ageing.

6 Appearance concerns are relevant in decisions to initiate and quit smoking. The authors suggest that health educators need to emphasise the immediate effects of smoking on skin and health. Moreover, initiatives such as the 'give up to save face' campaign need to target both males and females.

Grogan, S., Fry, G., Gough, B., Conner, M (2009). Smoking to stay thin or giving up to save face? Young men and women talk about appearance concerns and smoking. *Br J Health Psychol*, 1(1); 175-186.

Report from 4th Scientific Meeting of the UK Society for Behavioural Medicine

The fourth scientific meeting of the UK Society for Behavioural Medicine (UKSBM) took place on 6-7 January at the University of Exeter. The title of the conference was 'Incorporating the National Prevention Research Initiative (NPRI)'. The NPRI is a collaboration of organizations, medical charities and government bodies that share the aim of reducing people's risk of developing chronic diseases by influencing their health behaviours (and eliminating risky health behaviours). For details, see: <http://www.mrc.ac.uk/Ourresearch/Resource/services/NPRI/index.htm>.

The UKSBM conference saw many of the leading academics in worlds of psychology, public health, medicine and primary care research come together to discuss recent research findings and ideas about behavioural medicine and the processes of behaviour change. Several sessions outlined the importance of using new technology as a behavioural change technique. One such example was the keynote presentation delivered by Dr Elizabeth Murray: Using the internet for behaviour change research: Experience from the DownYourDrink trial. All presentations made by keynote speakers are available on the UKSBM's [website](#).

At an international level, the International Congress of Behaviour Medicine meets every two years. The next congress will be in 2010 (www.icbm2010.org):

Conference Date:

4-7 August 2010

Abstract Deadline:

01 December 2009

Early Registration Deadline:

15 April 2010

Meanwhile, the Society for Behavioural Medicine (SBM) will be meeting in Montréal, Canada: 22-25 April 2009.

Forthcoming events

9-10 March 2009

Innovations for Patient Compliance
London, UK

11-13 March 2009

Diabetes UK Annual Professional Conference 2009
Glasgow, UK

21-23 April 2009

e-PROficiency!
Fort Myers, Florida, USA

22-25 April 2009

Society for Behavioural Medicine
Montréal, Canada

24-26 April 2009

PsychSocial Aspects of Diabetes (PSAD) Annual Meeting
Dubrovnic, Croatia

16-20 May 2009

ISPOR 14th Annual International Meeting
Orlando, Florida, USA

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We should increase foods rich in omega-3 fatty acids (good fats, e.g. tuna, salmon, flaxseed, almonds, and walnuts) as well as fruits, vegetables, nuts and whole grains, which are also good for cardiovascular health.

- Stress and too much alcohol (more than 3-4 units per day for men and more than 2-3 units a day for women) may also contribute to CVD.

assess three specific symptoms of stroke: facial weakness (drooping of mouth or eyes), arm or leg weakness, and speech problems. If any of those are present it is time to get the person to a hospital.

- **Heart failure** refers to when the heart becomes less efficient at pumping blood around the body. It is usually caused when the heart muscle is damaged (by heart attack, viral infection etc). The most common

Risk factor	Statistics for England ⁷
Hypertension	31% of men and 29% of women have high blood pressure
Obesity	65% of men and 56% of women are overweight / obese
Diet	27% of men and 31% of women met the recommended guidelines of eating five or more portions of fruit and vegetables per day
Smoking	24% of men and 21% of women aged 16 and over reported that they were current smokers
Alcohol	22% of men and 13% of women had drunk alcohol on five or more days in the last week

Symptoms of CVD

- **Heart attacks** are a result of the narrowing of the coronary arteries due to a gradual build-up of fatty material (or atheroma) within their walls. If the atheroma becomes unstable, a piece may break off and lead to a blood clot, which can block the coronary artery and starve the heart muscle of blood and oxygen. The common symptoms of a heart attack include central chest pain that can spread to the arms, neck or jaw, with either shortness of breath or feeling sick / sweaty.

- **Strokes** occur when there is a sudden death of brain cells due to a lack of oxygen, which happens when the blood flow to the brain is impaired by a blockage or rupture of an artery to the brain. A new joint Stroke Association and Department of Health campaign to increase awareness of stroke symptoms uses the mnemonic FAST (Face, Action, Speech, Time)^{1,2}. Used by paramedics, FAST is designed to

symptoms of heart failure are breathlessness, tiredness and swollen feet and ankles.

Preventing CVD

CVD prevention involves knowing which risk factors you have and taking action. By controlling your risk factors with lifestyle changes (and medication if necessary), CVD can be prevented or delayed⁶. Blood clots are the primary causes of strokes and heart attacks but they can be prevented with anticoagulant drugs.

Lifestyle changes can focus on modifying existing unhealthy behaviours (e.g. quitting smoking) or developing new healthy behaviours (e.g. increasing physical activity). Psychological factors are key components to successful lifestyle changes. For example, motivation, expected benefits of change, and intentions to change all need to be high. So, take some time this month to consider your own risk factors and your motivation to look after your heart!

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