

Protect your heart

5 simple steps



The Heart Foundation is dedicated to fighting the single biggest killer of Australians – heart disease.

For over 60 years, we have led the battle to save lives and improve the heart health of all Australians.

Our vision is an Australia free of heart disease and our mission is to prevent heart disease and improve the quality of life of all Australians through our work in prevention, support and research. That's why we've developed 5 simple steps to help protect your hearts.

Protect your heart: 5 simple steps



1
Follow a heart-healthy eating pattern



2
Spend more time being active



3
Be smoke-free



4
Understand and control your cholesterol levels



5
Understand and control your blood pressure



Having a Heart Health Check is an important first step to protecting your heart. Talk to your GP about a Heart Health Check today.

Step 1

Follow a heart-healthy eating pattern

What does a heart-healthy eating pattern look like?

Heart-healthy eating patterns are based on a combination of foods, chosen regularly over time. This optimal combination encourages people to eat:

- Plenty of fruit, vegetables and wholegrain cereals.
- Healthy proteins, especially fish, seafood, legumes, nuts and seeds, with smaller amounts of eggs and lean poultry. Limit lean red meat to 1–3 times a week.
- Unflavoured milk, yoghurt and cheese. Those with high blood cholesterol should choose reduced fat varieties.
- Healthy fat choices, with nuts, seeds, avocados, olives and their oils for cooking.
- Herbs and spices to flavour foods, instead of adding salt.

Focus on eating the right combination of foods to improve your entire eating pattern by making small changes that you can continue long term.

Tips for following a heart-healthy eating pattern



Eat more fruit and vegetables

Most Australian adults do not eat enough fruit and vegetables. A diet full of a variety of fruits and vegetables is linked to healthier hearts and a lower risk of heart disease. It's easy to improve your diet: Just fill half your plate with vegetables at your main meal and try to include vegetables at other meal and snack times. Aim to eat five serves of vegetables and two serves of fruit every day.



Swap to wholegrain

Wholegrain cereals include more natural grain, this means they have more of nutrients like dietary fibre, B vitamins, vitamin E, and healthy fats. When you choose breads, cereals rice and other grains, go for wholegrain options. This can be as simple as swapping from white rice/pasta/bread to brown rice, wholemeal pasta and multigrain bread.



Make healthy fat choices

The best fats to include in your diet are monounsaturated and polyunsaturated (omega-3 and omega-6) fats. You can find these healthier fats in avocados, nuts, fish and sunflower seeds. You can reduce your risk of heart disease by replacing foods that are high in saturated or trans fats with these healthier fats. An easy way to start is by cooking with healthier oils like olive, canola, avocado, peanut and sunflower oil.



Herbs and spices instead of salt

We need salt in our diet, however, Australians are consuming far too much. Eating too much salt is bad for your heart; the sodium in salt can increase your risk of developing high blood pressure, a major risk factor for heart disease. You can easily get your daily requirements from naturally occurring salts found in fresh foods. If you want to add extra flavour to your food, use herbs and spices instead of adding salt.

Visit hrt.how/hh-recipes for more recipe ideas.

Step 2

Spend more time being active

Why be active?

Doing regular physical activity reduces your risk of having a heart attack or developing heart disease. Keeping active helps to control common heart disease risk factors, including high blood pressure, high cholesterol and being overweight. Getting regular physical activity will also help you feel more energetic, have stronger bones and muscles and feel happier and more relaxed.

Tips for being more active



Move more

Any physical activity is better than none. Being active doesn't just mean going to the gym, or playing a sport: it can be any activity that gets you moving. Ideas to stay active include going for a walk, gardening, going for a bike ride with friends or putting on some music and dancing!



Set realistic goals

Start with small, realistic goals and work your way up to the recommended 30 to 60 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity (like brisk walking) on most days of the week. Aim to do muscle-toning activities twice a week, including bodyweight exercises like push-ups, squats or tasks involving lifting, like carrying shopping. Visit walking.heartfoundation.org.au to sign up for a Heart Foundation Personal Walking Plan to help you meet walking and strength recommendations.



Choose activities you enjoy

When you enjoy being active, you are more likely to do it more often. You can vary the types of activities you do across the week to keep exercise interesting and so that you don't become bored. Commit to being active at certain times of the day, like early morning or lunch time; doing this helps to make getting active part of your daily routine.



Get social when you get active

Stay motivated and build stronger connections by doing physical activity together with a group, with friends or family, or even with the dog. Join a Heart Foundation walking group to boost your step count and your social circle. Find a group near you by visiting walking.heartfoundation.org.au and searching your suburb or postcode.



Sit less

Adults who sit less throughout the day have a lower risk of early death, particularly from heart disease. At work, take regular breaks from your desk. Get up and take a break every 30 minutes. Don't want to miss your favourite TV program? Stand up to watch it and do the ironing, do exercises in front of the television or wash the dishes at the same time.

Visit hrt.how/activity for more tips to be active every day.

Step 3

Be smoke-free

Why quit?

The first step to quitting is understanding all the risks associated with smoking. Smoking damages the blood vessels leading to your heart, brain and other parts of your body. This makes you four times more likely to die of heart attack or stroke and three times more likely to die from sudden cardiac death.

Tips to help you stay smoke-free



Quitting might take a few goes, so keep trying

Quitting smoking isn't always easy, it can take persistence. You can do it with planning, practice and help. If you slip up and start smoking again, learn from your quit attempt and have another go. Think about what made you smoke again, how you can better deal with this situation and what will help make it work next time.



Reach out for support

If you are finding it hard to quit, there is support available. Call the Quitline on 137 848, talk to your doctor about medications that might help, or try nicotine replacement therapy (NRT), like patches, gum, lozenges, or mouth spray. You may need to try a few options to find the one that works best for you.



Quit for those you love

When non-smokers breathe in second-hand cigarette smoke, they are at increased risk of developing heart disease. To protect the health of your family and friends, stop smoking inside your home, car or other enclosed places.



The best time to quit is now

Quitting smoking is the best thing you can do for your heart. When you quit smoking, your risk of heart attack and stroke decreases almost straight away. One year after you quit, your chance of heart attack is cut in half. The best way to get the ball rolling is to set your quit date.



Step 4

Understand and control your cholesterol levels

What is cholesterol?

Cholesterol is a fatty substance that moves around your body in the blood. Your body produces cholesterol naturally, and it is also found in some foods. Cholesterol is essential for the normal functioning of the body.

To reach the different parts of the body, cholesterol travels around the blood stream in tiny balls called lipoproteins. The two most common types are low-density lipoprotein cholesterol (LDL cholesterol) or 'bad cholesterol' and high-density lipoprotein cholesterol (HDL cholesterol) or 'good cholesterol'.

'Bad cholesterol' can stick to the walls of your arteries; this build-up of cholesterol is known as plaques. This can create blockages in your arteries and contribute to increasing your risk of a heart attack or stroke.



HDL high density lipoprotein



LDL low density lipoprotein



Tips to help you control your cholesterol levels



Get to know your dietary fats

Cholesterol in food only has a small effect on blood cholesterol levels but eating too much saturated and trans-fat has a much greater impact on blood cholesterol. Saturated and trans fats can be found in discretionary foods like pizzas, cakes, biscuits, pastries and deep-fried foods. Replace saturated and trans fats with healthy fat choices such as nuts, seeds, avocados, olives and their oils for cooking.



Follow a heart-healthy eating pattern

Fresh foods should make up the main part of your eating pattern. Choose a wide variety of fruit and vegetables and a variety of healthy protein sources including fish and seafood, lean meat, poultry, legumes, nuts and seeds. Make healthy fat choices by reducing your intake of foods rich in saturated and trans fats. Use herbs and spices to flavour foods, instead of adding salt.



Know your levels

A key step in controlling your cholesterol is finding out what your blood cholesterol levels are. See your doctor for a Heart Health Check if you are:

- 45 years or older
- 35 years or older and you have diabetes
- 30 years or older if you are a First Nations person.

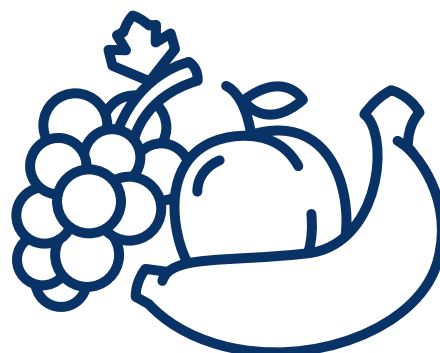
The check will involve taking a blood test to measure your cholesterol. These levels will be considered along with your other risk factors to determine your risk of a heart attack or stroke in the next 5 years.



If your doctor recommends medicines, take as prescribed

In some cases, your doctor may recommend that you take a medicine to lower your cholesterol, to reduce your risk of a heart attack or stroke. The best way to reach your treatment goals and enjoy the benefits of better heart health is to follow the advice of your doctor or pharmacist and take medicines exactly as directed. Don't stop taking them just because you feel better: they are working in the background to keep your cholesterol under control.

Visit hrt.how/hbch for more tips and advice on managing you cholesterol.



Step 5

Understand and control your blood pressure

What is blood pressure?

Blood pressure is the pressure of your blood on the walls of your arteries as your heart pumps it around your body. It's a vital part of how your heart and circulation work. Blood pressure that's high over a long time is one of the main risk factors for heart disease. As you get older, the chances of having ongoing high blood pressure increases.

Your blood pressure reading is usually shown as two numbers, with one number written over the other. The top number is your systolic reading, which is the measurement of the pressure in the arteries when your heart muscle contracts and pumps blood. The bottom number is the diastolic reading, which is the measurement of the pressure in the arteries when your heart muscle relaxes and refills with blood. A blood pressure reading under 120/80 mmHg is best for your health. Readings over 120/80 mmHg and up to 139/89 mmHg are in the normal to high normal range.

Tips to help control your blood pressure



Get active

Being regularly active helps to control high blood pressure and reduces your chances of having a heart attack or developing heart disease. Any physical activity is better than none. It's fine to start with a little and build up.



Minimise your salt intake

Eating a diet high in salt can lead to higher blood pressure. Having more than 5 grams of salt (a teaspoon) each day increases your risk of heart disease and stroke. The Heart Foundation recommends adults eat less than 5 grams of salt each day. Manufactured foods contain high amounts of salt, so avoid high salt foods, such as potato crisps, chips, salted nuts, processed meat and most take away foods. If you do eat packaged foods, look for 'No added Salt', 'Low Salt', 'Reduced Salt' or 'Unsalted' varieties. Minimise the amount of salt in your diet by using herbs and spices in cooking and at the table.



Know your numbers

You can't feel high blood pressure. You can have this condition without knowing. That's why it's important to get it checked and learn about how to manage it.

See your doctor for a Heart Health Check if you are:

- 45 years or older
- 35 years or older and you have diabetes
- 30 years or older if you are a First Nations person.

This check involves measuring your blood pressure. These levels will be considered along with your other risk factors to determine your risk of a heart attack or stroke in the next 5 years.

See your doctor for a Heart Health Check

See your doctor for a Heart Health Check if you are:

- 45 years or older
- 35 years or older and you have diabetes
- 30 years or older if you are a First Nations person.

During a Heart Health Check your doctor will assess your risk factors for heart disease including your blood pressure, cholesterol, diet and physical activity levels as well as your medical and family history. Your doctor will then inform you whether you are at low, moderate or high risk of a heart attack or stroke in the next 5 years. The most important part of this check-up is working with your doctor to manage your risk factors to improve your heart health.

A Heart Health Check involves a few key steps:



Talk to your doctor

Your doctor will start your check by talking with you about your heart disease risk factors. This usually involves having your blood pressure and cholesterol level checked and talking about what you eat, how often you are physically active, whether you smoke, as well as other risk factors for heart disease like your personal and family health history.



Learn about your risk

Once your doctor knows your risk factors, they will enter this information into a web-based calculator to understand your risk of having a heart attack or stroke in the next five years. Your calculator result will show whether you are at low, medium or high risk of having a heart attack or stroke.



Manage your risk

Depending on your result, your doctor may encourage you to keep doing what you are doing, or give you advice, information and support to make heart-healthy changes to your lifestyle, including changing your diet, doing more physical activity, quitting smoking or reducing the amount of alcohol you drink. If your risk level is high, your doctor may prescribe medicines to lower your blood pressure or cholesterol, or both.

Visit hrt.how/hh-checks for more information on Heart Health Checks.

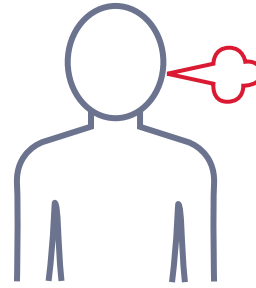


Warning signs of a heart attack

If you are experiencing any of these symptoms, tell someone. If symptoms are severe, getting worse, or last for more than 10 minutes, call triple zero (000) immediately and take 300 mg aspirin (unless you have an allergy to aspirin, or your doctor has told you not to take it).



Indigestion



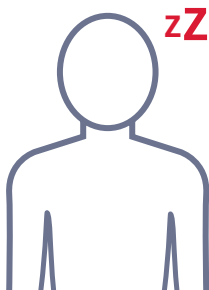
Shortness of breath/difficulty breathing



Jaw, shoulder and back pain



Nausea or vomiting



Fatigue/tiredness



Dizziness

Notes



For heart health information
visit heartfoundation.org.au

© 2023 National Heart Foundation of Australia ABN 98 008 419 761 (Heart Foundation)

Terms of use: This material has been developed for information and educational purposes only. It does not constitute medical advice. Please consult your health care provider if you have, or suspect you have, a health problem. The information contained in this material has been independently researched and developed by the Heart Foundation and is based on the available scientific evidence at the time of writing. It is not an endorsement of any organisation, product or service. The Heart Foundation and its employees do not accept any liability, including for any loss or damage, resulting from the reliance on the content, or in regards to its accuracy, currency and completeness. Any use of Heart Foundation material by another person or organisation is done at the user's own risk. This work, except as identified below, is licensed by the Heart Foundation under a Creative Commons Attribution - Non commercial - No Derivative Works (CC BY-NC-ND) 4.0 licence. To view a copy of this licence, visit: <http://creativecommons.org.au/>. You are free to copy and communicate this publication (however in no way commercialise the material), in accordance with the rules of attribution set out at: <https://creativecommons.org.au/learn/howto/>. Third party material that is not licensed under a Creative Commons licence may be referenced within this document. All content not licensed under a Creative Commons license is all rights reserved. Please contact the relevant third-party copyright owner if you wish to use this material.

