

Your Health



Health Partners Newsletter February 2022



In this issue

National Heart Month
All about your heart

Time to talk



National Heart Month

All about your heart

“Be the one who nurtures and builds. Be the one who has an understanding and a forgiving heart one who looks for the best in people. Leave people better than you found them.”

Marvin J. Ashton

Your heart is about the size of a fist and sits in the middle of your chest, slightly to the left.

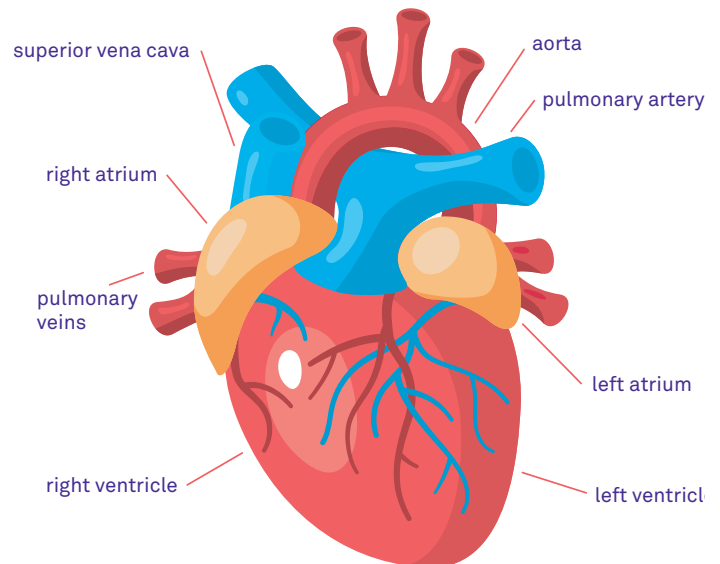
It is the muscle at the centre of your circulation system, pumping blood around your body as your heart beats. This blood sends oxygen and nutrients to all parts of your body and carries away unwanted carbon dioxide and waste products.

There are four chambers that make up the heart: two on the left side and two on the right. The two small upper chambers are the atria. The two larger lower chambers are the ventricles. These left and right sides of the heart are separated by a wall of muscle called the septum. Your heart pumps blood around the body all the time - about five litres (eight pints) of it - and this is called circulation. Your heart, blood and blood vessels together make up your cardiovascular system.

The right side of the heart receives blood that is low in oxygen because most has been used up by the brain and body. It pumps this to your lungs, where it picks up a fresh supply of oxygen. The blood then returns to the left side of the heart, ready to be pumped back out to the brain and the rest of your body.

Your blood is pumped around your body through a network of **blood vessels**. Blood vessels are able to widen or narrow depending on how much blood each part of your body requires. This action is partly controlled by hormones.

Your heart has four valves. They act like gates, keeping the blood moving in the right direction:



- Aortic valve: on the left side
- Mitral valve: on the left side
- Pulmonary valve: on the right side
- Tricuspid valve: on the right side.

For your heart to keep pumping regularly, it needs **electrical signals**, which are sent to the heart muscle telling it when to contract and relax.

Blood pressure: This is the measurement of the pressure within the arteries. It plays a vital role in the way your heart delivers fresh blood to all your blood vessels. For blood to travel throughout your body quickly enough, it has to be under pressure. This is created by the relationship between three things:

- Your heart's pumping action
- The size and stretchiness of your blood vessels
- The thickness of the blood itself.

One heartbeat is a single cycle in which your heart contracts and relaxes to pump blood. At rest, the normal heart beats approximately 60 to 100 times every minute and it increases when you exercise. To ensure an adequate blood supply around your body, the four chambers of your heart have to pump regularly and in the right sequence.

Check out how your heart works:
<https://youtu.be/ep4cQrYFL0w>





When the heart goes wrong

“Nothing makes a person happier than having a happy heart.”

Roy T. Bennett

Cardiovascular disease (CVD) is a general term for conditions affecting the heart or blood vessels.

It is usually associated with a build-up of fatty deposits inside the arteries (atherosclerosis) and an increased risk of blood clots. It can also be associated with damage to arteries in organs such as the brain, heart, kidneys and eyes.

CVD is one of the main causes of death and disability in the UK, but it can often largely be prevented by leading a healthy lifestyle. There are many different types of CVD. Four of the main types are described below.

Coronary heart disease: this occurs when the flow of oxygen-rich blood to the heart muscle is blocked or reduced. This puts an increased strain on the heart and can lead to:

- Angina: chest pain caused by restricted blood flow to the heart muscle
- Heart attacks: where the blood flow to the heart muscle is suddenly blocked
- Heart failure: where the heart is unable to pump blood around the body properly.

Strokes and TIAs: a stroke is where the blood supply to part of the brain is cut off, which can cause brain damage and possibly death. A haemorrhagic stroke is where blood leaks from a blood vessel in or around the brain and is sometimes called a brain bleed or brain haemorrhage. The blood leaks out into the brain tissue at high pressure, killing brain cells and causing brain swelling. Find out more here:

<https://www.stroke.org.uk/what-is-stroke/types-of-stroke/haemorrhagic-stroke>

A transient ischaemic attack (also called a TIA or "mini-stroke") is similar, but the blood flow to the brain is only temporarily disrupted. The main symptoms of a stroke or TIA can be remembered with the word FAST, which stands for:

- Face: the face may have drooped on one side, the person may be unable to smile, or their mouth or eye may have dropped
- Arms: the person may not be able to lift both arms and keep them there because of arm weakness or numbness in one arm
- Speech: their speech may be slurred or garbled, or they may not be able to talk at all
- Time: it's time to dial 999 immediately if you see any of these signs or symptoms.

Act FAST and call 999



Facial
weakness



Arm
weakness



Speech
problems



Time
to call 999

Peripheral arterial disease: this occurs when there's a blockage in the arteries to the limbs, usually the legs. This can cause:

- Dull or cramping leg pain, which is worse when walking and gets better with rest
- Hair loss on the legs and feet
- Numbness or weakness in the legs
- Persistent ulcers (open sores) on the feet and legs.

Aortic diseases: these are a group of conditions affecting the aorta. This is the largest blood vessel in the body, which carries blood from the heart to the rest of the body. One of most common aortic diseases is an aortic aneurysm, where the aorta becomes weakened and bulges outwards.

This doesn't usually have any symptoms, but there's a chance it could burst and cause life-threatening bleeding.





Causes of CVD

“Notice the silence. Notice your heart. Still beating. Still fighting. You made it, after all. You made it, another day. And you can make it one more. You’re doing just fine.”

Charlotte Eriksson

The exact cause of CVD isn't clear, but there are lots of things that can increase your risk of getting it. These are called "risk factors". The more risk factors you have, the greater your chances of developing CVD.

Most people over 40 can get a health check through their local health service. Part of this check normally involves assessing your individual CVD risk and advising you how to reduce it if necessary.

The main risk factors for CVD are outlined below.

- **High blood pressure (hypertension):** your blood pressure is too high, it can damage your blood vessels
- **Smoking and other tobacco use:** the harmful substances in tobacco can damage and narrow your blood vessels
- **High cholesterol:** cholesterol is a fatty substance found in the blood. If you have high cholesterol, it can cause your blood vessels to narrow and increase your risk of developing a blood clot
- **Diabetes** is a lifelong condition that causes your blood sugar level to become too high. High blood sugar levels can damage the blood vessels, making them more likely to become narrowed. Many people with type 2 diabetes are also overweight or obese, which is also a risk factor for CVD
- **Inactivity:** if you don't exercise regularly, it's more likely that you'll have high blood pressure, high cholesterol levels and be overweight. Exercising regularly will help keep your heart healthy. When combined with a healthy diet, exercise can also help you maintain a healthy weight
- **Being overweight or obese:** you're at an increased risk of CVD if (i) your body mass index (BMI) is 25 or above – use the BMI healthy weight calculator to work out your BMI (ii) you're a man with a waist measurement of 94cm (about 37 inches) or more, or a woman with a waist measurement of 80cm (about 31.5 inches) or more
- **Family history of CVD:** if you have a family history of CVD, your risk of developing it is also increased. You're considered to have a family history of CVD if (i) your father or brother were diagnosed with CVD before they were 55 (ii) your mother or sister were diagnosed with CVD before they were 65. Tell your doctor or nurse if you have a family history of CVD. They may suggest checking your blood pressure and cholesterol level
- **Ethnic background:** in the UK, CVD is more common in people of south Asian and an African or Caribbean background. This is because people from these backgrounds are more likely to have other risk factors for CVD, such as high blood pressure or type 2 diabetes
- **Other factors** that affect your risk of developing CVD include age, gender, diet, alcohol intake.



Preventing CVD

“There's nothing more inspiring than the complexity and beauty of the human heart.”

Cynthia Hand

A healthy lifestyle can lower your risk of CVD.

If you already have CVD, staying as healthy as possible can reduce the chances of it getting worse. Ways you can reduce your CVD risk include:

- **Stopping smoking:** if you smoke, you should try to give up as soon as possible
- **Having a balanced diet:** recommended for a healthy heart
- **Exercising regularly:** adults are advised to do at least 150 minutes of moderate activity a week, such as cycling or brisk walking. If you find it difficult to do this, start at a level you feel comfortable with and gradually increase the duration and intensity of your activity as your fitness improves. Visit your GP for a health check if you haven't exercised before or you're returning to exercise after a long break
- **Maintaining a healthy weight:** if you're overweight or obese, a combination of regular exercise and a healthy diet can help you lose weight. Aim to get your BMI below 25

- **Cutting down on alcohol:** if you drink alcohol, try not to exceed the recommended limit of 14 alcohol units a week for men and women. If you do drink this much, you should aim to spread your drinking over three days or more
- **Medication:** if you have a particularly high risk of developing CVD, your GP may recommend taking medication to reduce your risk. Medications that may be recommended include statins to lower blood cholesterol levels, low-dose aspirin to prevent blood clots, and tablets to reduce blood pressure.





Time to talk

“A lot of problems in the world would be solved if we talked to each other instead of about each other.”

Nickey Gumbel

Time to Talk Day in February 2022, draws attention to mental health and the importance of reaching out to others.

The day aims to help people open up and be honest about mental health, without the fear and stigma often attached to the topic. It can be daunting to express personal struggles and because of this, many people keep everything bottled up. By opening up, the likelihood of the person suffering seeking help increases, which can be crucial to the healing process.

We know that the more conversations we have, the more myths we can bust and barriers we can break down, helping to end the isolation, shame and worthlessness that too many of us with mental health problems are made to feel. Here are some listening tips that you can consider to help family, friends and colleagues to help you on your way:

- Ask questions and listen: show you really want to know how someone is feeling. Focus just on the other person, make eye contact, put away your phone
- Have patience: it may take time and several attempts before a person is ready to open up

- Don't try to fix it: just listening is often enough
- Use open questions: use ones that need more than a yes/no answer, and follow up, for example 'Tell me more'
- Say it back: check you've understood, but don't interrupt or offer a solution
- Have courage: don't be put off by a negative response and, most importantly, don't be afraid to leave silence
- Keep it simple: chat over a cup of coffee, send a text or go for a walk together.

A small conversation about mental health can make all the difference.



Sources

- **Samaritans:** <https://www.samaritans.org/how-we-can-help/contact-samaritan/>
- **MIND:** <https://www.mind.org.uk/need-urgent-help/using-this-tool>
- **Mental Health Foundation:** <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/your-mental-health/getting-help>

References

Sources: NHS Inform, BHF, NHS, NHS Wales, MIND, Samaritans, MHF, www.stroke.org.uk

