

Family Friendly Factsheet

Healthy Heart



The key elements to maintaining a healthy heart are a balanced diet, regular exercise and staying smoke free. There are five major areas of diet which play a part in heart disease prevention; cholesterol levels; blood pressure levels; maintaining a healthy weight; fibre consumption and protection against blood clot formation.

Cholesterol is a form of fat which is transported in the blood. Although cholesterol is essential for cell formation, hormone and bile production, the LDL form of cholesterol can obstruct arteries and cause damage, increasing the risk of decreased blood flow to the heart and therefore increasing the risk of a heart attack. The major sources of cholesterol are foods such as cakes, biscuits, margarine, butter, lard and chips. It is thought that antioxidants found in fruit and vegetables can help to counteract the effect of cholesterol on the arteries.

Controlling blood pressure is also important in order to maintain a healthy heart. Although high blood pressure can be caused by certain genetic conditions, diet is thought to play a big part, with those who are overweight, exposed to smoke, take little exercise and consume high levels of salt at the greatest risk of high blood pressure. While taking steps to reduce these risk factors is the most effective way to lower blood pressure, recent studies have shown that foods high in potassium such as bananas and potatoes can have a beneficial effect on blood pressure.

Obesity is another risk factor for heart disease. Studies have also shown that the distribution of fat around the body can have an impact on the risk of heart disease. Those who carry weight around the waist are more at risk of developing heart disease than those who are heavier around the hips and thighs.

Fibre has been shown to reduce blood cholesterol levels, consequently a diet rich in fibre from foods such as bread, pasta and oats is beneficial for controlling blood pressure levels. Certain foods, such as oily fish, are also thought to reduce the risk of blood clot formation and therefore the risk of heart attacks.

Although some of these requirements may seem daunting, major changes may not be required. For example switching to skimmed milk and reduced fat milk products can considerably reduce fat intake while still providing all of the benefits of whole milk. Similarly, tasting food before automatically adding table salt can notably reduce daily salt intake. In terms of exercise, getting off the bus a stop early or walking to the shops instead of driving all counts towards your daily exercise target.

With Christmas fast approaching, thoughts turn to buying presents, preparing dinner and organising festive parties and gatherings. All of these factors have the potential to turn Christmas into a stressful time, which, combined with the traditions of eating more, exercising less and the cold weather, is perhaps why there are significantly more cases of heart problems around December and January. So, here is some advice on how to celebrate Christmas while keeping your heart healthy.

It is important to eat a healthy balanced diet in order to keep body weight, cholesterol levels and blood pressure under control and to help prevent blood clots and fatty deposits forming in arteries, which can ultimately lead to heart attacks or heart disease. Traditional Christmas foods such as Brussels sprouts, cabbage and nuts are high in antioxidants which may help to protect your heart. Many other traditional Christmas foods such as turkey, carrots, parsnips, potatoes and dried fruit are low in fat and high in essential vitamins and mineral, helping to keep your Christmas cuisine healthy.

Take advantage of being together as a family around the holidays and organise some activities to get your heart pumping and work off those extra calories. Exercise has been shown to have a positive effect on blood pressure and cholesterol and improves the efficiency of the heart to pump blood around the body. Try getting family and friends involved in a sports match such as football or rugby, or take a walk or cycle together after Christmas dinner. Walking one mile will burn around 100 calories which is around one small bar of chocolate!