



## EATING FOR HEART HEALTH

*Maria Dow MSc RD MBDA*

As a nation we are suffering fewer heart attacks compared to 10 years ago. The reasons are unclear. It could be due to better treatment following a heart attack. It could also be down to more effective drugs to improve the risk factors of heart disease such as cholesterol and blood pressure. There is a greater awareness of the risk factors for heart disease such as smoking, lack of exercise and an unhealthy diet.

Obesity and diabetes however are 2 major risk factors for heart disease that are on the rise. Improving our diets, avoiding excess alcohol, and stopping smoking can reduce our risks of having a heart attack and ensure that they are less life threatening if they do strike.

Prof Steve Leslie, Consultant Cardiologist, Inverness says:

“ ***It's important to know your own risks. If you have a family history of heart disease then it is important to get a check-up and keep an eye on factors like diabetes, high cholesterol and high blood pressure which can run in families. These can all be treated. Don't wait until it's too late.*** ”

**Graham Bruce** from Dundee did just that. He admitted to not knowing much about his risk of heart disease, and the effect his lifestyle was having on his cholesterol levels. He has lost weight and improved his health as a result of seeing his GP.

*"I wanted to make changes because I went to the Doctor and my cholesterol was through the roof. He basically said that I have got to do something. I am carrying too much weight for my age and height."*

Making changes to your lifestyle is difficult. Professor Leslie admits it is easy to become overwhelmed with information. It is the little things that you can work into your everyday life that make a difference.



## 5 STEPS TO A FITTER HEART

### 1 WATCH YOUR WEIGHT

If you're overweight then losing just **5kg or 11lbs** can significantly reduce your blood pressure, cholesterol and risk of diabetes. You will feel the benefits sooner than you think.

### 2 BECOME A WAIST WATCHER

Measure your waist around your belly button, not necessarily where your trousers sit. If it measures over **37 inches for men** and **32 inches for women**, lose some weight and increase your physical activity – it doesn't have to be in the gym, talk to one of our Wellness Coaches to create a programme that incorporates the things you love doing, even if that's dancing, walking, or gardening.

### 3 SET YOURSELF 1 OR 2 REALISTIC GOALS

Decide what is important for you to change for example: smoking, diet, alcohol, or exercise. **Prof Leslie** stresses: *"The important thing is to make achievable changes and not to try to do everything at once."*

**Graham** managed to make small changes to his lifestyle. *"I cut away things like my 2 beers a night. Cut it down to weekends. Deserts like ice cream and things like that too. I would have had tons of the stuff. Well, I only have that on a Sunday meal and it's only a small portion now."*

He feels his determination to succeed with the changes that he has set himself has made the difference. *"Be determined, be very, very determined. Set yourself a goal and stick to it."*

### 4 EXPECT SETBACKS

Don't be too hard on yourself. **Prof Leslie** has seen that people give themselves a hard time. *"Build and consolidate on the small changes and you will get improvements. Try not to do it all at once, it is not sustainable."*

**Graham** has had setbacks. Life happens. Each time he has been determined to get back on track. This month has been particularly challenging for Graham for one reason and another. *"I know that this month that I have eaten more than I should. I had too many bags of crisps. I am aware in my mind that after this month I will settle down again and start back."*

He is determined however to continue with the changes, emphasising that it is not a quick fix. He enjoys the benefits that weight loss and good health brings. *"It's the rest of your life."*



## 5 GET SUPPORT

Studies have shown that persons who are successful in making changes to their lifestyles have support at hand. **Prof Leslie** says: *“There are lots of ways that you can get help, from friends, family, and healthcare services. Don’t be afraid to ask.”*

Many GP practices participate in screening programmes to help patients reduce their risk of heart disease. Speak with your GP about your concerns and how they can help.

**Graham’s** GP referred him onto a specialist nurse who was able to guide him through what changes he could make to help reduce his risk of having a heart attack. **Graham** also said that his wife has been wonderfully supportive in helping him make the changes and sticking with them.