



DO YOU LOVE YOUR HEART?

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Do you know that the average adult has a heart age 5 years older than their actual age? Ideally, you would want a heart age younger or equal to your age, but often this isn't the case.

In this article we have pulled together some practical information for you to take charge of your heart health. There is quite a lot of detail so you may wish to download the pdf and take your time reading through it. Remember that **your health is your responsibility**, always seek professional medical advice if you have any health concerns.

A WHAT IS HEART HEALTH?

If you are healthy enough to maintain the average 72 bpm for 80 years your heart will beat 3,027,456,000 during your lifespan (72 bpm x 60 mins x 24 hrs x 365days x 80 years), pumping millions of litres of blood around your body. Whilst doing so, the heart is responsible for the delivery of oxygen, fuel, and hormones to every part of the body; and the removal of waste products too (cells also die and that debris needs to be eliminated). Your heart's workload never ceases, and for many of us it will perform well for our lifetime.

When the heart stops, essential organs and their functions fail, in some cases immediately. This can be due to natural causes or accelerated by medical conditions, diseases, genetics and poor health and lifestyle choices.

Heart health can be defined as the efficiency with which your heart can do the above and for how long. The decisions you make daily influence your heart health - for better or worse. Sometimes, heart health is also called cardiovascular (CV) health, and this is because your heart forms part of your CV system, which includes arteries, veins, capillaries and blood, all of which should be considered when discussing heart health.





B WHY IS HEART HEALTH IMPORTANT?

Simply put, your heart health dictates your quality of life and for how long you will live in good health. The leading cause of heart failure in the world is **cardiovascular diseases (CVD)**. In the UK it is estimated that 7 million people are affected by CVD.

The most common condition that leads to heart disease, heart attacks and strokes is called atherosclerosis. This is when the arteries become narrowed or blocked by a build up of fatty material present in the blood.

While heart disease can be down to age or genetics, one of the best preventative measures is a healthy lifestyle from a young age, but if that ship sailed for you some time ago, lifestyle changes and medication can be enough to nip the heart disease in the bud.

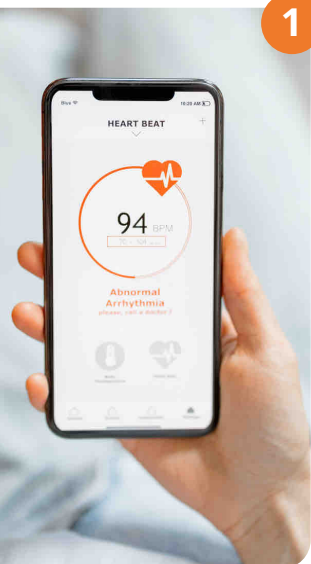
C HOW DO YOU MEASURE HEART HEALTH?

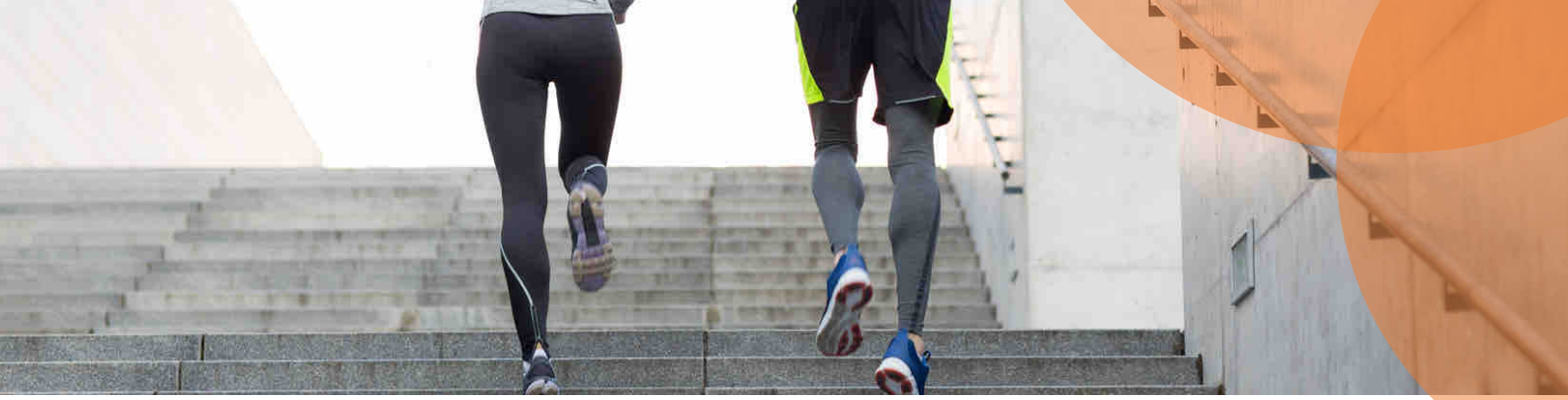
Here are 4 simple ways you can measure your heart health:

- 1 Resting heart rate** - taking your pulse is the simplest measure of heart health, a resting heart rate (eg: after you have been sitting or lying still for a few minutes) of a healthy adult could be in the range of **60- 90 beats per minute (bpm)**. Most of the time a low heart rate signifies optimum heart health – endurance athletes can have heart rates as low as **40bpm** as they specialise in cardiovascular training.

A high resting heart rate of **100bpm** or more can be a sign of tachycardia (fast heart rate), this can prevent the chambers of the heart filling completely with blood between contractions and affect blood flow.

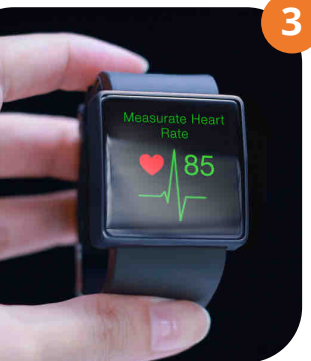
Taking your pulse can also identify an irregular heartbeat (atrial fibrillation), which means your heartbeat could be unusually fast or slow with this condition. Symptoms of both fast or irregular heart beats include fainting, dizziness, shortness of breath and fatigue. **This condition and any symptoms should always be flagged to your GP.**





2 Maximum heart rate – a quick and easy way to estimate your maximum heart rate (MHR) is to subtract your age from 220. But why is this important to heart health? Although your MHR is not an indicator of your physical health or fitness, it is very important for understanding your target heart rate zones. Knowing your target zones helps you exercise safely and most efficiently. It also helps you determine your exercise intensity in relation to your goals.

FOR EXAMPLE, if you are a complete beginner to exercise and live a sedentary lifestyle but would like to start moving more it would be recommended that you begin exercising at **55-65%** of your MHR and progress steadily. It is recommended that when exercising you stay within your training zones and do not exceed your upper limit (**90% or above** of your MHR), although it is possible to train at this level (if you are a healthy fit individual) for a short period of time without suffering any adverse effects to the heart.



3 Recovery time – this is your heart's rate of recovery upon completion of exercise, measured 1 minute after ceasing activity. You can measure this with the help of technology (fitness trackers etc) or by quickly taking your pulse when you've finished exercising, resting for 1 minute and re-taking your pulse.

Studies have shown that CVD is linked to a rate of recovery of 5bpm or less in adults, a healthy adult may have a recovery rate of **12-20bpm** after the one-minute rest period (although this is subject to the testing procedures).



4 Blood pressure – deemed the silent killer by the NHS (and therefore very important to monitor) consists of two numbers. Systolic pressure (when the heart is contracting) and diastolic pressure (when the heart is relaxing/refilling).

Your blood pressure (BP) will fluctuate throughout the day depending on your activities however, when tested, a healthy BP in adults is **120/80 or less**, 140/90 or higher is considered high blood pressure and if you're in-between you would be considered "at risk" of high BP.

Other ways to measure heart health are by an electrocardiogram (**ECG**) or echocardiogram which would be carried out by a specialist.



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D HOW CAN YOU IMPROVE HEART HEALTH?

You may already be doing some or all of these or you may still need to make these changes due to health concerns – the good news is anyone can do them.

If you would like more info on any of the following points or anything previously mentioned in this article, please don't hesitate to get in touch.

NUTRITION



Salt – cut down on your salt intake, too much salt can cause high blood pressure. This is because salt increases water retention, this means there is excess water in your blood which results in extra pressure on your blood vessel walls. Adults should eat no more than 6g of salt a day (approximately a teaspoon) and there is a lot already in prepared foods so decreasing your added salt intake is one of the easiest ways to reduce your blood pressure.



Alcohol – similarly to caffeine, alcohol can cause the blood vessels to constrict as it increases the production of a hormone called renin. Alcohol also increases cortisol levels in the body which leads to decreasing the amount of fluid we can get rid of in urine. This means we retain more fluid leading to higher blood pressure.



Caffeine – if you drink more than 3 cups of coffee a day you may wish to consider cutting down as too much caffeine can raise your blood pressure. This is because it briefly constricts your blood vessels when consumed and therefore BP increases. This rise in BP is temporary and should cease within 3-4 hours however, still something to be aware of especially if you have a history of high BP.



Cholesterol – it's important to remember that not all cholesterol is bad, we need good cholesterol (HDL) to absorb the bad cholesterol and take it to the liver which then gets rid of it. It is bad cholesterol (LDL) that builds up within the arteries, causing them to narrow. Therefore, we want to increase our levels of good cholesterol whilst lowering our levels of bad cholesterol by; reducing processed food / saturated fat intake, eat less red meat, introduce some vegetable recipes into your diet, drink enough water, eat 8-10 portions of fruit and veg, increase fibre intake and add oily fish into your weekly diet.





LOSE WEIGHT



Being overweight or obese poses a plethora of health risks, some of which affect the heart. Carrying excess weight forces your heart to work harder to pump the blood around the body. Losing just a few pounds of body fat can make a positive difference to your blood pressure. Often though, it is the lifestyle changes that are required to lose weight that will have the biggest benefit on your heart health and quality of life.



MOVE MORE

Move more – regular exercise improves heart health in many ways. Adults should aim to do a minimum of 150 minutes of moderate aerobic exercise a week (or 75 minutes of high intensity exercise) and two strength training sessions each week.



STOP SMOKING

Smoking is one of the leading causes of CVD. Chemicals present in cigarette smoke can cause inflammation of the cells lining blood vessels, this narrows the blood vessels. Smoking has been proven to lead to many CVD such as atherosclerosis, heart disease, heart attacks and strokes. Quitting smoking will improve your heart health and reduce your risk of CVD (and many other diseases) immediately.



SLEEP

Ensuring you get enough sleep (7-9 hours a night) can help you keep your heart healthy. When you are asleep your heart rate drops and then increases again to prepare you to wake up. Poor quality sleep and abrupt awakenings throughout the night cause a rapid increase in heart rate, this has been linked to irregular heartbeat and heart palpitations. Research has shown that interrupted sleep can cause a quick surge in heart rate and blood pressure resulting in angina. If you are not getting enough sleep, it's important you identify why and work on it.

ORAL HEALTH

Research has shown that there is a connection between poor oral hygiene and heart disease. Gum disease, caused by poor oral hygiene causes a bacterial infection to enter the blood which can harm the valves in your heart – good oral hygiene is therefore especially important if you have artificial heart valves. A good oral health regime includes brushing your teeth twice a day, flossing daily and regular check ups with your dentist.

Compiled from sources including NHS, American Heart Foundation, British Nutrition Foundation

