



A Guide to Heart Health

September is Heart Health Month. Over a quarter of all deaths are caused by cardiovascular diseases, and are often linked to genetics but the majority can be avoided through the adoption of a healthy lifestyle. Here are some tips from Health Promotion Officer, **Aisling Gough**.

A Healthy Heart Diet. There is no one food group or nutrient that will contribute to a healthy heart, but more so a healthy eating pattern. Consistently fuelling your body with nourishing vitamins and nutrients will increase not only your heart health, but your overall health.

- Adding as many fruit and vegetables into your diet is a great way to increase your vitamin-intake, whilst lowering the risk of heart disease.
- Don't be afraid of eating carbohydrates, but do try and choose the wholegrain or complex options such as oats, quinoa, brown rice, wholegrain pasta.
- Choose fats that are high in Omega-3 and Omega-6, such as nuts, avocado, fish and seeds.
- Make an effort to limit the amount of oils/salt you use when cooking. Swapping out salt for herbs and spices can drastically reduce your salt intake whilst improving taste!

A Healthy Heart Exercise Regime. It is no secret that exercise can drastically improve your heart health. But what type of exercise is best for you? Similar to food, there is no one go-to exercise that combats heart disease, see a combination of the below types of exercise and find what you really enjoy.

- Aerobic exercise such as walking, running, swimming and cycling is highly beneficial for someone who may already suffer with any heart health issues as it improves circulation, which in turn lowers blood pressure and heart rate.
- Strength or resistance training has been shown to reduce the risk of a heart attack or stroke. However, if you are someone that is living with a heart disease, it would be advisable to consult your doctor before weight training.

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- Stretching and flexibility-related exercises do not directly affect heart health, but they do contribute to musculoskeletal health, which enables you to do aerobic and resistance training, and thus decrease the risk of heart disease. Certain stretching exercises, such as yoga, can also contribute to a reduction in stress, that can reduce pressure on the heart.

Cut out smoking! We are all well aware that smoking is extremely damaging to heart health, with over 80% of smokers losing their lives to heart-related illnesses. However, knowing this fact does not make giving up any easier. Quitting smoking requires determination, willpower and support. Below are a few tips on how to give up:

- Set a date to stop.
- Support is key. This can be from friends or family, or from a source such as a 'Quit Plan' from the HSE or NHS.
- Prepare your surrounds, and ensure any cigarettes you own are thrown out.
- Prepare to change your routine. In the times that you would normally smoke, find something else to do, such as a walk, time to make a tea, or a similar activity that you enjoy.
- Use the money you've saved from not smoking to buy yourself a weekly/monthly reward. Setting a financial goal through the savings you've made from quitting is a great incentive.
- You will come across difficult times. Remember that they are temporary and will pass, and that the beauty is in the challenge.

Tackle Stress. Studies suggest that the high levels of cortisol from long-term stress can increase blood cholesterol, triglycerides, blood sugar, and blood pressure. The body responds to stress in a variety of ways ranging from backpain, headache and stomach aches to a loss in energy, a change in sleep patterns and mood swings. It's important to keep an eye out for any of these signs and address them accordingly.

- If you are feeling under pressure or stressed, utilise your Employee Assistance Programme to chat to an experienced fully accredited counsellor.
- Exercise is an excellent stress-reliever. Even taking a short walk has been proven by research to improve your mood.
- Talk to a friend or family member. A problem shared, is a problem halved.
- Write down how you're feeling, this can allow for a sense of release of cortisol (our stress hormone).