

Mind, body, and soul: Your guide to a healthy heart



Smoking, obesity, and physical activity all contribute to a leading cause of death globally: **cardiovascular diseases**. High blood pressure, coronary heart disease, and associated complications such as stroke account for nearly 18 million deaths each year, but the right **lifestyle adjustments can protect your heart and lower your health risk**.

Here are a few tips to help you **live a heart-healthy lifestyle**.



Safeguarding against stress

Stress is an inevitable part of life, and in addition to the mental strain it causes, it can also harm your heart. Studies indicate that stress is associated with a **20-25% increased risk of developing coronary heart disease**, while long-term stress leads to increased heart rate and blood pressure levels, which wears down our cardiovascular system over time.

Stress can also damage our heart indirectly, through less subtle ways. When stressed, people often eat unhealthy food and don't have the energy or time to exercise. This can pave the way for other heart-damaging behaviours such as smoking and drinking too much alcohol. However there are simple ways to help control stress, manage your wellbeing, and give your heart a break.

To safeguard against stress, try to prioritise the following:

- **Exercise** – this releases mood-boosting endorphins, helps to clear your mind, and improves your sleep.
- **Relaxation techniques** – deep breathing exercises, meditation, and yoga can relax your body and mind, helping you to effectively cope in stressful situations.
- **Sleep** – getting enough sleep is essential, helping us to restore our energy levels and allowing our mind and body to recover. Aim for 7-9 hours of sleep each night.
- **Spend time with your loved ones** – talking to someone about what's causing you stress can ease your emotional burden and may provide you with a different perspective to manage your mental health more effectively.
- **Enjoy life** – Set aside time for hobbies and interests that bring you joy, and don't hesitate to seek support from friends, family, or professionals when needed.

Prioritising nutrition for a healthy diet

Obesity and having overweight have a profound impact on heart health, significantly increasing your risk of developing cardiovascular diseases. Excess body fat, particularly visceral fat, promotes plaque buildup in the arteries (atherosclerosis), narrowing blood vessels and reducing blood flow to the heart.

You can keep a healthy diet, weight, and heart by:

Controlling your portion sizes

Eating nutritious food is great but overdoing it can lead to weight gain, putting more strain on your heart. Restaurants often serve needlessly large portions, but try to control your portion sizes when you cook at home. Something as simple as a **small plate may help you to control your portions**, but sometimes our eyes deceive us. Try using measuring cups, spoons or a scale until you're comfortable with your judgement.

Eat mindfully and give yourself **20 minutes to digest your meal before you consider a second helping**. After plating your meal, divide any leftovers into containers and set them aside for future meals.



Eating more fruit, vegetables and whole grains

Fruit, vegetables and whole grains are rich in vitamins, low in calories and full of fibre. Like other plants or plant-based foods, **they contain substances that may help prevent heart disease.**

Fruit and vegetables are the ideal alternatives to high calorie, ultra-processed snacks such as chocolate or crisps, which typically contain artificial ingredients that have been linked to poor heart health.

Ideally, at least **half of the grains you eat should be whole grains**, such as brown rice, whole grain pasta, porridge and quinoa. Focusing on whole grains will also help you to avoid less healthy grain products such as white bread, biscuits and cakes, which are often high in fats, salt and added sugar.



Know your fats

We all need to eat a **small amount of fat** to have a heart-friendly and balanced diet. The right amount of fat helps our bodies to produce crucial hormones, absorb vitamins and efficiently use energy, but too much can be a bad thing, and some fats are healthier than others.

To reduce your risk of high cholesterol and heart disease, swap foods high in saturated fats like sausages, butter and chocolate, or high in trans fats such as fried food and baked goods, for food containing unsaturated fats.

Unsaturated fat is the most heart-friendly fat, and can be found in olive oil, avocados, almonds, and salmon. Reducing your intake of trans and saturated fats can **lower your risk of coronary heart disease by nearly 21%!**

Get moving

No heart health plan is complete without **regular physical activity**. Whether aerobic, strength-based or flexibility-focused, regular exercise can **reduce the risk of heart disease by up to 35%**. It can also lower blood pressure, reduce bad cholesterol levels, and boost good cholesterol.

Aerobic exercise such as walking, cycling, and swimming helps your heart and circulatory system to work better, while also improving your emotional wellbeing and quality of sleep. Experts recommend **at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity** (i.e. where you feel warm and comfortably breathless) **aerobic exercise per week**.

If this feels intimidating, remember that **everyday activities** like housework, gardening, or playing with your children will all benefit your heart and overall health. Even going on a **brief, six-minute daily walk** can have profound effects: research suggests it could add up to four years to the average lifespan and reduce the likelihood of cancer.

Incorporating strength exercises is also highly beneficial and can help or control conditions like type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and obesity. Strengthening your muscles enables your arms and legs to work better, improving your aerobic fitness and reducing the demand on your heart. Lifting weights, using bands or cable machines, or performing bodyweight exercises are all great options. Aim for **two to three days of resistance training a week**, ideally spread out so you have at least a day's recovery in between.



There's no silver bullet to fighting heart disease but making these simple changes can keep you and your heart strong and healthy.

Contact **HealthHero** today for more support and advice. We're with you every step of the way.
