

## Helping your heart: Small daily habits that protect it



Heart health is often linked to big moments, like **test results** or a **health scare**. But for most people, it is shaped slowly, through everyday habits that are easy to miss.

Life gets busy. Work, family, tiredness, and stress can all take priority. If you feel mostly fine, it is easy to assume your heart is fine too. Many people do. That does not mean you are careless. It means nothing has forced your attention yet.

The thing to know is that heart problems often build up over time. **They do not always cause clear signs at first.** That is why daily habits matter, even when nothing feels wrong.

You do not need to change everything at once. **Small choices**, repeated most days, are what make the difference. How you move, what you eat most days, how you sleep, and how you handle stress all play a part.

This guide looks at **easy habits that fit into real life**. The focus is on what feels doable, not perfect. You can start with one change, or simply use it to understand what helps your heart over time. You are not behind by starting small.

## Why daily habits matter for your heart

Your heart pumps blood around your body. This blood carries oxygen and nutrients to your brain, muscles, and organs. It also helps remove waste. To do this, your heart beats around **100,000 times a day**.

When daily habits put extra pressure on the body, the heart has to work harder. Sitting for long periods can affect blood flow. Poor sleep can raise blood pressure. Ongoing stress can increase heart rate and strain blood vessels. Diets high in salt, sugar, or fat can raise cholesterol levels over time.

These changes do not usually cause sudden symptoms. They build up slowly. Blood vessels can narrow. Blood pressure can creep up. The heart muscle can become **less efficient**. Many people only notice a problem once these changes are already established.

Daily habits can also work the other way. **Regular movement** helps blood flow more easily. Balanced meals support healthier cholesterol levels. Good sleep helps regulate blood pressure. Time to rest can lower heart rate and reduce stress hormones.

This is why small, **steady habits matter**. They reduce how hard your heart has to work, day after day.



## Moving your body in simple ways

Regular movement supports heart health in practical ways. It helps blood move more freely through the body, supports blood pressure, and helps the heart muscle work with less effort during everyday activity.

Sitting for long periods slows blood flow, especially in the legs. Over time, this can raise blood pressure and increase strain on the heart. Standing up and moving every **30 to 60 minutes** helps restart circulation.

Short walks are one of the easiest ways to support your heart. **A brisk walk of 10 to 15 minutes** can raise your heart rate enough to strengthen the heart muscle and improve how your body uses oxygen. Doing this once or twice a day, on most days of the week, helps you build towards around **150 minutes of moderate movement** across the week.

Movement also helps manage weight and blood sugar. When muscles are used regularly, they take up more glucose from the blood. This helps lower blood sugar after meals and reduces the risk of type 2 diabetes, which is closely linked to heart disease.

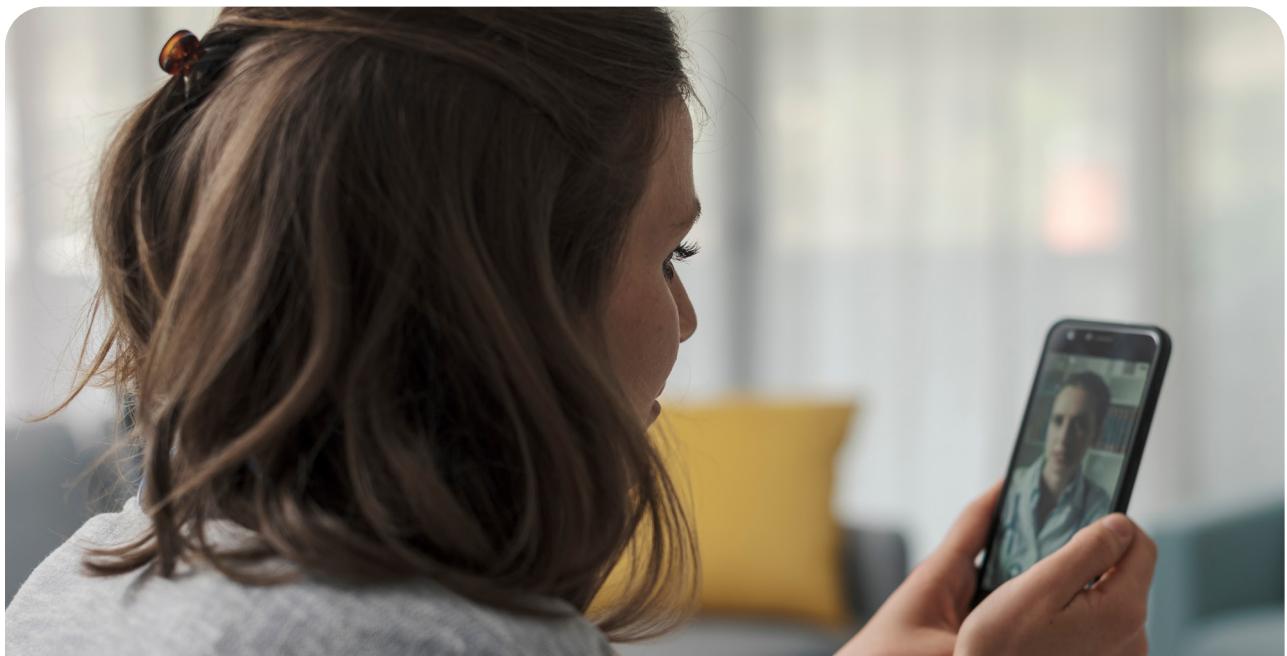
### You can build movement into daily life in simple ways:

- Walk for 10 minutes after meals
- Stand up and stretch if you have been sitting for more than an hour
- Take the stairs for one or two floors if it feels comfortable
- Walk while on phone calls

A helpful guide is movement that makes you **breathe a little faster** but still allows you to talk. Over time, this can lower resting heart rate and reduce strain on the heart during daily life.



**If movement feels hard right now, start with five minutes. Or even one minute. What matters most is doing it often, not doing a lot at once.**



Heart problems often develop slowly. Many people feel well while blood pressure, cholesterol, or blood sugar are rising in the background. By the time symptoms appear, changes may already be established. We often see that daily habits play a bigger part than one-off events. Long periods of sitting, poor sleep, ongoing stress, and regular alcohol use can all raise heart risk over time. These patterns are common, especially in working adults. The earlier these habits are noticed and adjusted, the easier it is to reduce strain on the heart. Small changes made early often have more impact than larger changes made later.

## Eating in a way that supports your heart

What you eat affects three things linked to heart disease: blood pressure, cholesterol, and blood sugar. These can change slowly, without clear signs at first.

**Eating at regular times** helps keep blood sugar more stable. Long gaps between meals can lead to sharp rises later on. Over time, this can increase the risk of weight gain and type 2 diabetes. For many people, eating every three to four hours during the day helps.

Some foods support heart health because of how they affect cholesterol and blood pressure:

- **Vegetables and fruit** provide fibre and potassium, which help lower blood pressure
- **Wholegrain foods** like oats and wholemeal bread help reduce LDL cholesterol
- **Beans and lentils** provide fibre that supports cholesterol control
- **Nuts and seeds**, in small amounts, can improve cholesterol levels
- **Oily fish** once or twice a week can lower the risk of heart rhythm problems

### **Other foods raise heart risk when eaten often:**

- High salt intake raises blood pressure
- High sugar intake increases blood sugar and weight over time
- Foods high in saturated fat raise LDL cholesterol, which can narrow blood vessels

### **Helpful steps include:**

- Keeping salt intake below one teaspoon across all food and cooking in a day
- Choosing water, milk, or unsweetened drinks most of the time
- Using olive or rapeseed oil instead of butter or ghee
- Limiting ready meals, takeaways, and packaged snacks to occasional use

Heart health is shaped by eating patterns over months and years. What you eat most days matters more than single meals.

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## **Sleep and rest matter for your heart**

During sleep, heart rate and blood pressure drop. This gives the heart and blood vessels time to recover from the day. When sleep is short or broken, this drop does not happen fully.

Regularly sleeping fewer than seven hours a night is linked to raised blood pressure, higher blood sugar, and weight gain. Poor sleep can also make stress harder to manage, which keeps heart rate higher more often than it should be.

**Sleep timing matters too.** Going to bed and waking up at very different times can disrupt heart rate patterns, even if total sleep time seems enough. A steady schedule helps keep these rhythms more stable.

You can **support better sleep** by focusing on a few habits:

- Aim for seven to nine hours most nights
- Keep bedtime and wake-up time within the same one-hour window
- Stop caffeine after early afternoon
- Turn off screens at least 30 minutes before bed
- Keep the bedroom dark, quiet, and cool

Rest during the day also plays a part. Long stretches without breaks keep stress hormones high. Short pauses to sit, breathe slowly, or step outside can help lower heart rate and blood pressure.

**Ongoing sleep problems are common and can be addressed. Improving sleep can lower heart risk over time.**

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## Stress and its effect on your heart

When you feel stressed, your body releases hormones that raise heart rate and blood pressure. This is useful in short bursts. When stress lasts longer, these changes stay switched on.

Over time, this can **damage blood vessels** and **raise the risk of heart disease**. Stress is also linked to inflammation, which plays a part in the build-up of fatty deposits inside blood vessels.

Stress often affects habits too. People under pressure may sleep less, move less, or rely more on caffeine, alcohol, or processed food. These changes can increase heart risk without being obvious at first.

Managing stress is not about removing it completely. It is about reducing how often your body stays in a high-alert state.

### Steps that can help include:

- **Taking short pauses** during the day to slow your breathing
- **Spending time outside**, even for ten minutes
- **Setting limits on work messages** outside working hours
- **Talking things through** with someone you trust

Slow breathing can help bring heart rate and blood pressure down. One option is breathing in through your nose for four seconds, then breathing out slowly for six seconds, for two to three minutes.





## Alcohol and smoking

Alcohol and smoking both affect the heart in clear ways. The effects build up over time, even if you feel fine now.

Alcohol raises blood pressure and can affect heart rhythm. It also adds calories, which makes weight gain more likely. For heart health, lower intake is better. This means staying within **14 units a week**, spread across several days, with alcohol-free days.

Smoking damages blood vessels, reduces oxygen in the blood, and makes the heart work harder. It also raises the risk of blood clots. There is **no safe level of smoking** for heart health.

### If you drink alcohol, small changes can help:

- Have alcohol-free days each week
- Choose lower-strength drinks
- Pour smaller measures at home
- Avoid drinking to manage stress or sleep

If you smoke, **cutting down helps**, but stopping brings the biggest benefit. Blood pressure and circulation begin to improve within weeks.



## Signs your heart may need more support

Heart problems **do not always start with sudden pain**. Early signs are often subtle and easy to dismiss.

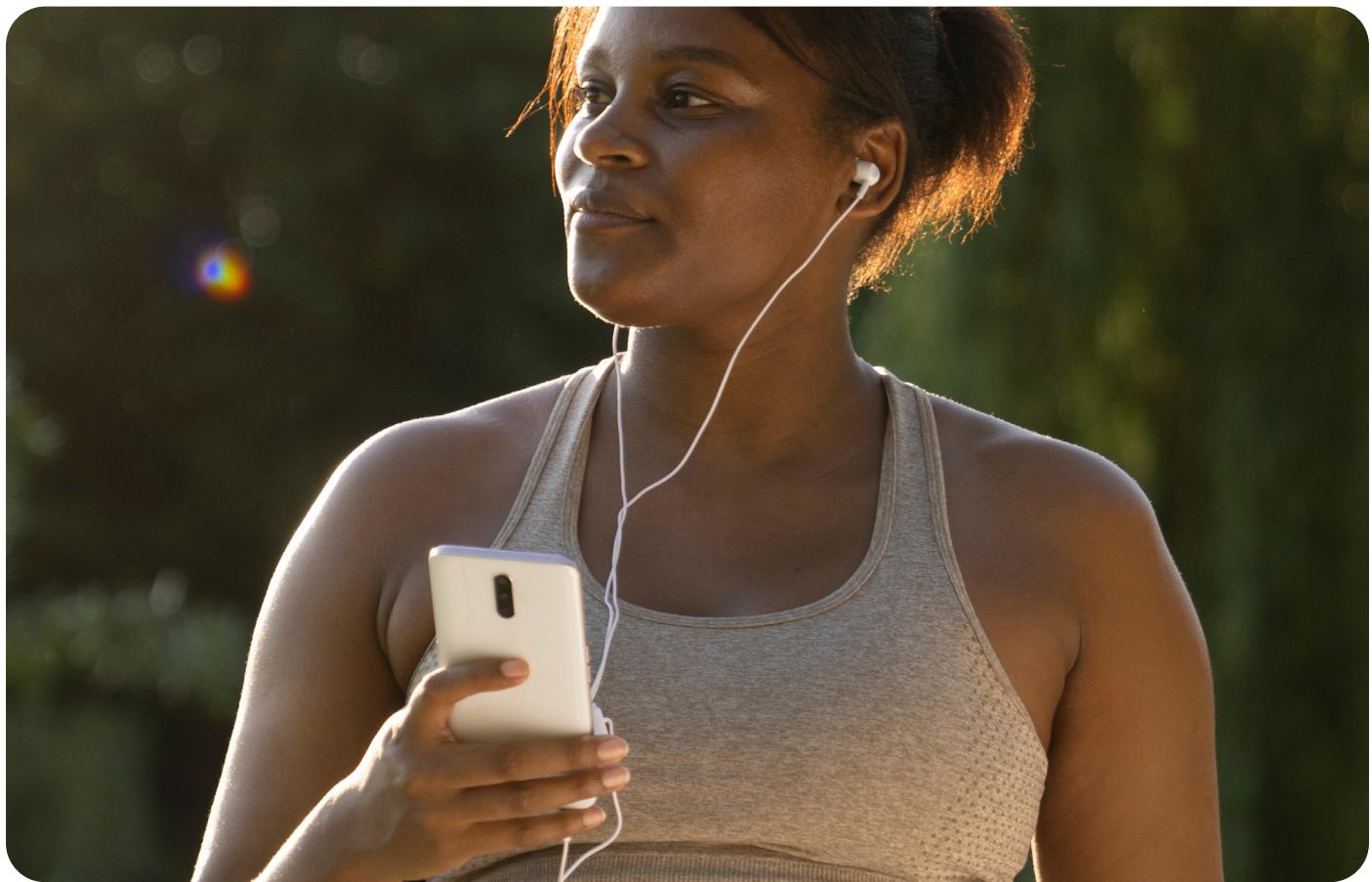
### You might notice:

- Getting out of breath sooner than before
- Feeling unusually tired most days
- Chest tightness during activity that eases with rest
- Feeling light-headed or dizzy
- Noticing your heart racing or skipping beats

### Other signs can build up slowly:

- Poor sleep that leaves you unrefreshed
- Headaches linked to tension
- Swollen ankles or feet by the end of the day
- Relying on caffeine to get through routine tasks
- Feeling wiped out after small efforts

These signs do not always mean there is a heart problem. But they are worth paying attention to. Noticing patterns in how you feel is just as important as test results.



## How HealthHero can help

If any of the habits or signs in this guide feel familiar, you do not have to work it out alone. Support is available, and it can help you understand what is going on early.

With HealthHero, you can book an online GP appointment at a time that suits you.

### **During the appointment, the doctor can:**

- talk through symptoms or changes you have noticed
- look at heart risk based on age, sex, and health history
- advise on checks such as blood pressure or blood tests
- suggest next steps that fit your day-to-day life
- arrange follow-up care if needed

You don't need severe symptoms to ask for help. Many heart problems develop slowly, and early advice can make a real difference.

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