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How healthy is your heart?

Whilst your heart is as old as you are – it does have its own age, which is a sign of how healthy you are. Here we show a calculator which compares your real age to your heart age and we show how you can turn back the clock on heart attack risks by improving your lifestyle.

According to the British Heart Foundation (BHF) there are around 7.6 million people living with heart and circulatory diseases in the UK. This condition causes more than 160,000 deaths each year with around 48,000 of those being under the age of 75.

Your actual age affects your risk of [heart disease](#) and so does your gender – women have fewer heart attacks than men, however are twice as likely to die from one¹.

The NHS, Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, UCL, and the BHF, put together the '[Know Your Heart Age](#)' tool to give you an idea of how healthy your heart is.

Here are some of the ways you can reduce your risks of heart problems and help your heart age.

Stop smoking

Stopping [smoking](#) is probably the single biggest favour you can do for your body, and while it may not be easy, there is plenty of support. The NHS has lots of helpful information and you can download the app [here](#).

It's often as simple as making an appointment with a local pharmacist, who can give you advice and quitting-smoking aids such as [nicotine replacement](#). You're more likely to quit successfully by using a combination of support and aids than with willpower alone.

Get moving

The benefits of regular exercise are pretty much endless – in addition to strengthening your heart and cutting your risk of both heart attack and stroke, weight-bearing exercise cuts your risk of [osteoporosis](#) – thinning of the bones – can boost your mood, and reduce your chance of [depression](#).

The key from your heart's perspective is aerobic exercise – the kind that gets your heart pumping and makes you mildly out of puff. The [10,000 steps a day](#) target is no bad thing, but it can be hard to know how much you are challenging yourself when you walk. To help you can use the free NHS [App called Active 10](#) which monitors your walking and speed.

Just one brisk 11-minute walk every day provides significant benefit. And if you can increase that number to three a day, you will have achieved one of the five moderately active sessions per week that is recommended for health.

Active 10 or the [Couch to 5k app](#) can help you slot exercise into your day-to-day routine.

Check your blood pressure

[High blood pressure](#) is right up there at the top of the risk factors. It's also probably the single biggest risk factor for stroke. You won't know you've got high blood pressure unless you have it checked – except in very rare situations, high blood pressure doesn't cause short-term symptoms, but it puts a huge strain on your heart.

For most, your high blood pressure can be controlled with daily medication. But you need to keep taking your tablets and have your blood pressure checked regularly. Cutting the salt in your diet also goes a long way to reducing your blood pressure.

How's your cholesterol?

[High cholesterol](#) is a risk factor for heart attack. But it's 'bad' LDL cholesterol that furs up your arteries – 'good' HDL cholesterol can actually protect you. So some people have a normal total cholesterol figure, but high levels of bad and low levels of good cholesterol. Your GP or nurse can advise on the breakdown of your cholesterol figures and whether you need to take action.

While most people's cholesterol levels are largely down to lifestyle, there's one inherited condition which means you could be at much higher risk of heart attack without treatment – [familial hypercholesterolaemia](#), or FH. This condition runs in families and means your body can't process cholesterol properly. This leads to a build-up of damaging cholesterol on your arteries, including your heart.

If you have a parent, brother, sister or child who had a heart attack under 60, or an aunt, uncle or grandparent who had one under 50, you could be at risk. Other signs include raised cholesterol and fatty lumps on your eyelids, knuckles, knees, or backs of ankles. If you think you might be affected and don't know your cholesterol level, get it checked without delay.

Lose weight

Along with stopping smoking, keeping your weight within healthy limits does your heart a huge favour. Losing 1 stone (6.4 kilos) if you're overweight cuts your blood pressure nearly as much as a daily blood pressure tablet. You can see if you are a healthy weight by checking your [BMI](#).

Eating a heart-healthy diet, with more fruit and veg, swapping refined (white) foods for wholegrain or wholemeal ones, and butter or saturated fat for olive oil, will also help. And regular exercise is key to keeping your heart healthy.

1. [BHF: Heart Matters](#).

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