

Have a heart

By Dr Justine Butler, senior health campaigner, Vegetarian & Vegan Foundation

Heat disease affects almost 2.6 million people in the UK and kills over 100,000 of them every year – it is our biggest killer. Twenty-one per cent of men can expect to die from it and 15 per cent of women, making it the most common cause of premature death. Cost to the NHS of this epidemic was £625 million in 2005 with more being spent on heart drugs than any other type of medication.

Now that we've got your attention, you'll be pleased to know that it needn't be all gloom and doom... there are ways to considerably lower your risk of heart disease. By understanding a few basic principles and following some easy guidelines you can significantly lower your risk of this and other diseases.

What happens?

Heart disease is a result of fatty deposits building up on the inside walls of arteries, making them narrower and restricting blood flow in the same way that the sewerage pipes get blocked when you pour fat down the plughole! When the heart's arteries are involved (coronary arteries) blood supply can be cut off and a heart attack or sudden death is the outcome. Someone has a heart attack every two minutes in the UK and in 30 per cent of cases, they die.

Risk factors

All diseases have 'risk factors' – genetic or environmental influences, such as how you live and what you eat, that increase your chances of developing a specific disease. Eating red meat, for example, increases your risk of bowel cancer. Heart disease has a number of well-known risk factors, including high cholesterol levels, high blood pressure (hypertension), a

family history of heart disease, diabetes, obesity, inactivity, stress, excessive alcohol and smoking.

Many of these risk factors result from poor diet, particularly the high intake of saturated fats, hydrogenated and trans fats, cholesterol, salt, refined carbohydrates such as sugar and white flour and a low intake of wholegrains, fruits and vegetables. A typical Western diet, dominated by meat, eggs, dairy and processed foods, contains high levels of these undesirable substances.

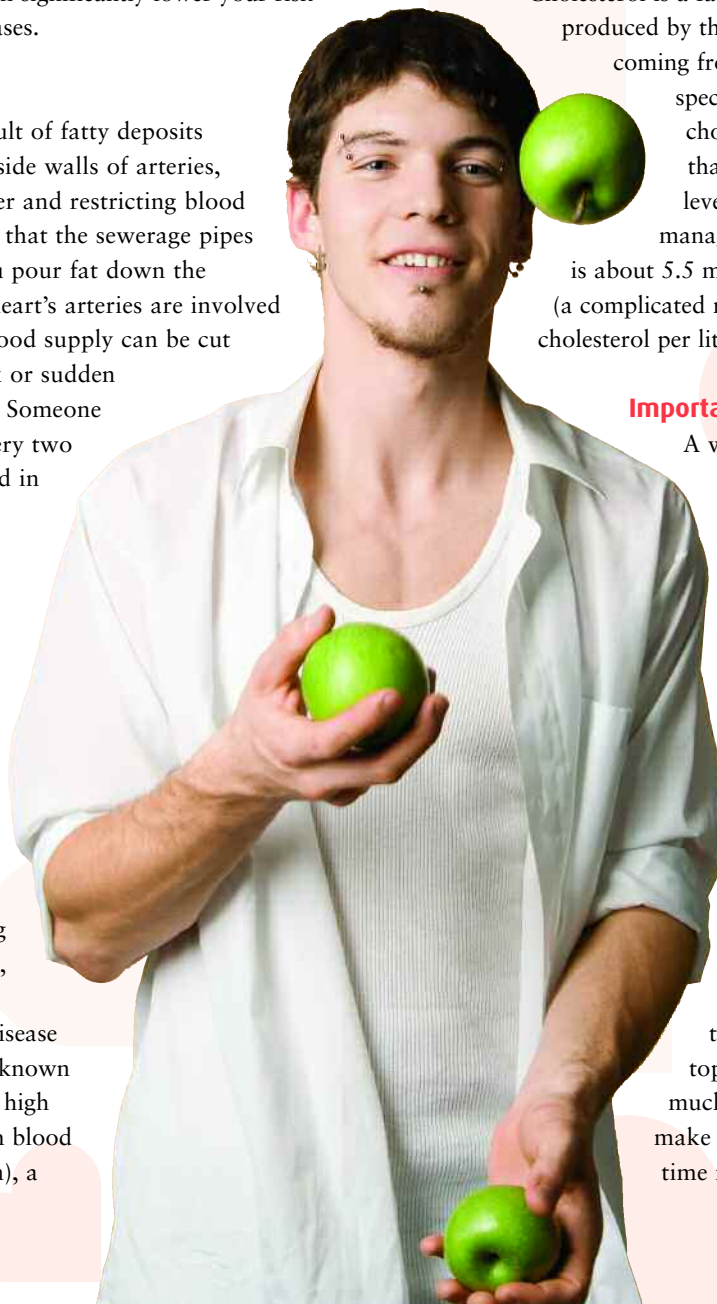
What is cholesterol?

Cholesterol is a fatty substance most of which is produced by the liver with only a small amount coming from what you eat – animal foods specifically as a vegan diet is cholesterol free. UK guidelines say that we should aim for a cholesterol level below 5.0mmol/l but we're not managing it as the average level for men is about 5.5 mmol/l and 5.6 mmol/l for women (a complicated molecular measurement of cholesterol per litre).

Importance of diet

A well-balanced, wholegrain veggie diet is low in fat, high in fibre and loaded with the types of food that reduce risk factors. Vegetarians' cholesterol levels are lower by about 0.5mmol/l, they have lower blood pressure, weigh between six pounds and two stone less and their risk of dying from heart disease is a massive 25 per cent less!

A family history of heart problems may increase your risk and while there's not much you can do about this you can reduce and even reverse some of the other risks. Take a look at our top 12 tips. If you think it's a bit much to adopt them all overnight, make one change a month and by this time next year you'll have cracked it.



12 steps to a healthier heart



1. Ditch the bad fat

You don't need saturated – mainly animal – fat but you do need healthier, unsaturated fats (essential fatty acids). Saturated fat, and to a lesser degree cholesterol, drive up cholesterol levels and increase the risk of obesity. Swap meat, eggs and dairy foods for healthier plant foods, including wholegrains, pulses (peas, beans and lentils), nuts and seeds.

2. Switch to healthy fat

Omega 3 essential fatty acids are thought to protect the heart. Flaxseeds (linseeds) and their oil are an excellent source. Others are walnuts, soya beans and rapeseed oils and green leafy vegetables. Flax oil should be stored in the fridge and added to dressings, sauces and cooked food only as heating it destroys any benefits. In oily fish – that much vaunted source of omega 3 – the mercury, PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) and dioxins it contains outweigh any benefits.



3. Fill up on fibre

Fibre is found in fruits, vegetables, pulses and wholegrains and lowers blood pressure and cholesterol. It's said that eating 10 grams of fibre a day reduces the risk of heart attack by 14 per cent and the chances of dying from heart disease by 27 per cent. A medium-sized apple contains around 3 grams of fibre, a slice of wholemeal bread contains 1.5 grams and a small portion of broccoli about 2.7 grams.

4. Get your 5-a-day

Eat at least five portions of fruit and veg a day – not just for the fibre but for their disease-busting antioxidant vitamins A, C and E. These can shield your heart by protecting it from free radicals that damage your arteries. Choose brightly-coloured varieties to boost your antioxidant intake – sweet potato, purple sprouting broccoli, asparagus, curly kale, blueberries, raspberries, avocados... as wide a range as possible.



5. Include soya foods

The Joint Health Claims Initiative announced in 2002 that “the inclusion of at least 25 grams of soya protein per day, as part of a diet low in saturated fat, can help reduce blood cholesterol levels”. A 250ml glass of Alpro soya milk (blue carton) contains 9.3 grams of protein and 100 grams of Cauldron organic tofu contains 12 grams.

6. Maintain a healthy weight

Obesity has trebled since the 1980s and well over half of UK adults are either overweight or obese. A waist measurement of more than 88cm (35 inches) in women and 102cm (40 inches) in men increases the risk of heart disease and diabetes. A vegetarian diet can help weight-loss and losing just a few centimetres from your waist can significantly lower your risk of heart disease. See the VVF's new *V-Plan Diet* guide, available from www.vegetarian.org.uk/shop/globesity.shtml.

7. Take regular exercise

Lack of physical activity raises the risk of heart disease. A well-balanced vegetarian diet, coupled with regular exercise, can help shed those excess pounds! Set yourself a daily target of 10,000 steps and walk your way to health and fitness with the new VVF pedometer (available from our webshop at www.vegetarian.org.uk/shop or by telephoning 0117 970 5190).

8. Cut out the salt

A high salt intake can increase blood pressure. The government recommends no more than 6g a day for adults. Use fresh herbs and spices to flavour your food and get rid of the salt-cellar – your taste buds adapt.

9. Watch out, homocysteine's about

This amino acid helps to build protein, is produced in the body but can cause real heart problems at excess levels. Folate (folic acid) and vitamins B6 and B12 reduce levels. Folate and B6 are found in yeast extract, green leafy vegetables, pulses, wholegrains, nuts and fortified breakfast cereals. B12 is in fortified foods, including yeast extract, soya milk, breakfast cereals and margarines.



10. Chill out

Take time out just for yourself with a gentle activity such as yoga, Tai Chi, or just making time to relax.

11. Don't smoke

Smoking is a major risk factor and stopping can halve your risk after just one year.

12. Cut back the booze

Too much alcohol increases the risk of heart disease. Avoid binge drinking.

For a healthier, longer and fitter life, the message is loud and clear... Go Veggie!