

features



Think you're not at risk of heart disease? So did most heart disease patients, once. Nine in 10 of us have at least one risk factor that we can change, so it's worth following our 10 steps. Don't risk it.

heart healthy IN 10 STEPS

Become heart healthy by following dietitian Lisa Yates' simple, 10-step challenge.

Every 10 minutes, an Australian loses their life to Coronary Heart Disease (CHD). According to the National Heart Foundation, the incidence of heart disease has risen an alarming 18 per cent over the last decade. In fact, CHD was responsible for 34 per cent of all Australian deaths in 2006 – deaths that were largely preventable. Help protect yourself by following these steps to heart health.

STEP 1

Get to know your numbers

Do you know your cholesterol and blood pressure levels? Since one in two Australians aged 25 years and older has high blood cholesterol and one in three has high blood pressure, this could be you. See your GP annually and keep tabs on these numbers: both high blood cholesterol and high blood pressure are two important risk factors for CHD.




STEP 2

Start by losing just 5–10 per cent of your current weight

About 52 per cent of women and 58 per cent of men aged 25 and over are overweight or obese – which increases your risk of developing CHD up to three times over. Your risk also increases if you store fat around your tummy, as this fat is considered more dangerous than fat on the thighs and buttocks. But lose just 5–10 per cent of your body weight and you'll see a drop in blood pressure and cholesterol. If you weigh 100kg lose 10kg, 90kg lose 9kg and so on.

STEP 3

Try eating a Mediterranean diet

A Mediterranean diet loaded with fruits, vegetables, nuts, legumes and olive oil can reduce the risk of CHD by about 30 per cent. See "Heart smart on a budget" (p34) for more inspiring healthy heart choices. 

Are you at risk of coronary heart disease or stroke?

- You have a family member with: heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, overweight/obesity.
- You have been through menopause.
- You are overweight.
- You have impaired glucose tolerance or diabetes.
- You have high blood pressure.
- You have high blood cholesterol.
- You eat many foods high in saturated fat (and at the same time, not enough plant foods).
- You salt your food.
- You are a smoker.
- You exercise less than 30 minutes a day.
- You often feel stressed, depressed or socially isolated

If you've checked off three or more, talk to your GP.

STEP 4

Check your stress

Stress has many detrimental effects on the body and one of those is an increased risk of developing heart disease. Luckily, simple things can help you manage it.

Practice yoga, listen to music, take a walk or a bath, use candles, get adequate sleep (eight hours a night), and make an effort to laugh more – laughing has been found to reduce stress and benefit your heart health.

Physical touch is important too: studies have shown that frequent hugs can slow blood pressure and heart rate, reduce stress in women and increase levels of oxytocin, a ‘feel-good’ hormone.

Finally, don’t ‘bottle up’ your emotions. Research has found that women who keep their feelings to themselves are four times more likely to die from CHD.

STEP 5

Kick the salt

Recent research suggests that reducing salt intake by 25–35 per cent can lead to a 20 per cent reduction in CHD and stroke, so toss out that old salt shaker and avoid adding salt when cooking. Instead, look for salt-reduced or no-added salt products, packaged foods marked with less than 120mg sodium per 100g on the label, and flavour your meals with herbs and spices instead.



STEP 6

Eat healthy fats

The low-fat, no-fat mantra of the ‘80s and ‘90s didn’t help reduce CHD risk because we need to eat the healthy monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats to help regulate cholesterol production. Try a handful of nuts most days, fish three times a week, avocado on salads and sandwiches, use small amounts of cooking oils and look for products rich in omega-3 fats (a type of polyunsaturated fat) such as fish, eggs, certain milks and yoghurts.

STEP 7

Quit the habit

On average, one in five Australians still smoke. Smoking not only makes your chances of developing heart disease up to six times more likely, it increases the risk of CHD in others by 30 per cent. But within one day of quitting smoking, your blood pressure drops. Within one year of giving up a pack-a-day habit, you save more than \$3,500. And within two to six years of living cigarette-free, your risk of developing CHD returns to similar levels as non-smokers. For help, call Quitline on 131 848.

STEP 8

Count ‘exercise minutes’

To maintain a heart-healthy weight and fitness level, we need an hour a day of exercise – but the majority of us don’t get it. To squeeze more exercise into your day, try adding in periodic, 10-minute bursts of activity. Park the car 10 minutes from the office, walk 10 minutes to the next bus stop, buy your morning coffee or lunch 10 minutes from your office or walk 10 minutes to the shops to buy those few groceries. Then, walk a little longer the next week, aiming for an hour a day. If you haven’t exercised in a while see your GP first for that check up.



STEP 9

Get a dog

Having a pet not only gets you exercising, but provides you with a source of unconditional love, which helps prevent social isolation and reduces stress. Pet ownership also increases your chances of surviving a heart attack. But overweight dogs can be at risk of heart disease too, so you both need to stay active.

STEP 10

Eat low-GI carbs


This helps in two ways: firstly, the fibre in these foods can help reduce cholesterol reabsorption, thereby lowering cholesterol levels. Secondly, wholegrains help control blood glucose levels, which is important because high blood-glucose levels cause proteins to become sticky and, instead of functioning properly, they accumulate in the blood, become incorporated in the walls of the arteries and form atherotic plaques.



The facts on heart disease

- In 2008, CHD was the leading cause of death in both sexes.
- Only 3 per cent of Australians realise heart disease is the leading cause of death in women.
- CHD is Australia's most expensive disease, costing the Australian healthcare system \$7.9 billion in 2002–2003. This amount is expected to rise to \$10.3 billion in 2012–2013.
- Statistically, women are four times more likely to die from heart disease than they are from breast cancer.
- 90 per cent of adults have at least one modifiable risk factor for CHD and 25 per cent have three or more risk factors.
- By 2051, CHD is expected to affect one in every four of us.

Heart attack symptoms in women

Did you know that the symptoms of a female heart attack can be quite different to those typically experienced by men? Men generally have central chest pain or pressure and/or pain radiating down one arm, but women may experience pain in their shoulder or stomach – not in the chest – and feel fatigued, nauseous and dizzy in the weeks prior to the incident. Alarming, research has shown that more than half of female heart attacks are not spotted, so if you do experience any of these symptoms or have pain anywhere in the upper body for 10 minutes or more, go straight to the hospital. 

HEART SMART ON A BUDGET

heart-healthy foods under \$1.50 per serve

Many of us often assume that eating healthily means eating expensive foods, but as these foods show, that's just not the case.



LEGUMES

65¢ dried; 80¢–95¢
canned per serve

Eat: 1–2 serves a week



from
65¢
PER
SERVE

The humble baked bean, chickpeas, lentils and other legumes are all rich in cholesterol-lowering soluble fibre, while soybeans are rich in soy protein and fibre and can also help lower blood cholesterol.

NUTS

50¢–90¢ per 30g

Eat: a handful (30g) a day



from
50¢
PER
SERVE

Nuts are full of heart-friendly nutrients, fibre, plant sterols, healthy monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats, and antioxidants (including vitamin E, manganese, copper, selenium and zinc). And just a handful a day can reduce your risk of CHD by 30–50 per cent.

OILY FISH

from 90¢ a serve, canned

Eat: at least twice a week



from
90¢
PER
SERVE

Tuna, salmon and sardines are rich in omega-3 fats, which keep the heart's healthy rhythm and prevent blood clots – especially if you already have CHD.

FRUIT & VEGETABLES

30¢–\$1.10 per serve;

fresh, frozen or canned

Eat: 2 serves of fruit a day;

5 serves of vegetables a day



from
30¢
PER
SERVE

Fruit and veg are low in energy, but high in fibre and water. Each colour is a unique antioxidant which may protect cholesterol from sticking to your artery walls, so aim for a variety of differently coloured fruit and veg each day. Eat the skins when you can too, to get your soluble fibre – this can help reduce cholesterol reabsorption. Fresh produce is often cheaper (and may be healthier) than dried fruit, snack packs, and canned or frozen produce – but they're all great choices.

OATS

4¢–18¢ per 30g serve

for plain rolled oats; 40¢

per 60g serve for muesli

Eat: include in your minimum

4 serves of wholegrain breads and cereals a day



from
4¢
PER
SERVE

Oats are rich in the soluble fibre and beta-glucans proven to help lower cholesterol reabsorption. They're also super cheap (especially home brands). Muesli is slightly more expensive, but it also contains heart-healthy nuts, seeds and dried fruit, so enjoy either one.



PSYLLIUM HUSKS

from 7¢ per tablespoon
Eat: add a maximum of 1–2 tablespoons to your cereal each morning



Psyllium is a form of soluble fibre and is the key ingredient in Metamucil, but you can also buy in bulk bags. Psyllium helps reduce cholesterol reabsorption.



WHEATGERM

from 9¢ per 20g
Eat: add to breakfast cereal (if they don't already contain nuts)

Wheatgerm is high in vitamin E: a heart-healthy antioxidant that stops high-fat foods such as wheatgerm, nuts and oils from going rancid too quickly. It's also known as 'anti-rust' for our bodies. Unfortunately, research has shown that vitamin E supplements don't work, so it's important you get vitamin E from food.

LOW-FAT YOGURT

from \$1.00 per 150–200g
Eat: include in your three serves of low-fat dairy each day



Low-fat yoghurt is low in saturated fat, but still loaded with calcium, which is an important fat-cell 'communicator' needed for a healthy weight.

AVOCADO

75¢ per quarter
Eat: use occasionally in place of other spreads or add a quarter of an avocado to daily salad



Studies have shown that replacing the butter on your bread or switching the mayo in your salad with avocado, can lower your cholesterol, so eat up.

PLANT-STEROL MARGARINES

40¢–45¢ per tablespoon
Eat: 1 tablespoon a day for three weeks



Plant sterols are another component in food that helps prevent cholesterol reabsorption. The 500g tub may seem expensive, but there are 25 serves per tub – nearly a month's worth.

EGGS

22¢–52¢ per egg
Eat: a couple times a week (there are no longer any restrictions on egg consumption)

Eggs may be high in dietary cholesterol, but it's now proven that dietary cholesterol has little effect on your blood cholesterol level. It's actually the saturated fat in your diet that your liver uses to make blood cholesterol, so enjoy regular eggs or eggs fortified with heart-healthy omega-3 fats. **hfg**



Lisa Yates is an Accredited Practising Dietitian who enjoys eating nuts, fish and avocado for her heart health.