



# Love your heart

You may be surprised to learn that heart disease kills more UK women than anything else, so it's never too soon to show it some TLC

**W**hen you picture the classic person at risk of heart disease, what image springs to mind? More than likely it's that of an overweight, stressed-out businessman putting in 12 hours a day at his desk... So it may come as something of a surprise to discover that, in fact, heart disease is the number-one killer of women in the UK – causing more deaths than all types of cancer put together.

'A lot of women still think of heart disease as a man's problem,' confirms women's health guru Dr Marilyn Glenville. 'But exactly the same number of women as men (3.5 million each in the UK) are living with cardiovascular disease, meaning that they are at increased risk of having a heart attack or a stroke, or a condition such as angina.'

There's also a tendency to think that time is on our side. Heart disease usually comes later in life, so why should we worry about it now? 'It's true that age is the biggest risk factor, with around 80 per cent of 70- to 80-year-olds having some form of it,' says Dr Justin Carter, a consultant cardiologist at North Tees and Hartlepool NHS Trust. 'But I'd estimate that half of all women in their forties already have some degree of it – though many will be unaware of it.'

If you're one of those affected, then your heart disease is most likely to be caused by a build-up of fatty material in your arteries. It's a condition called atherosclerosis and is the biggest cause of heart attacks (and also strokes). Unless it's really bad – so bad that you have symptoms such as chest pain because your heart is struggling to work – you won't know you have atherosclerosis. But you are more



## Key heart conditions

**CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASE (CVD)** All the diseases of the heart and circulation including coronary heart disease, angina, heart attack, congenital heart disease and stroke.

**CORONARY HEART DISEASE (CHD)** When the arteries supplying your heart muscle with blood are narrowed by a gradual build-up of fatty material within their walls.

**ANGINA** Chest pain caused by atherosclerosis.

**CARDIAC ARREST** Your heart stops pumping blood around the body, usually because of an abnormal heart rhythm called ventricular fibrillation (VF) which means the heart quivers or 'fibrillates' instead of pumping.

**ATRIAL FIBRILLATION** An abnormal heart rhythm (often caused by high blood pressure), which quadruples your risk of a stroke.

at risk of it if you have high blood pressure (140/90 or above), high cholesterol or type 2 diabetes, you smoke, you're overweight, you have a family history of cardiovascular disease or you don't exercise enough.

Stress also has an effect – if you are under a lot of pressure at work or always worrying about something, the hormones that your body pumps out will encourage the build-up of fatty deposits. Stress can also cause bits of these to break away, which can lead to a blockage in an artery and trigger a heart attack or stroke.

**'I'd estimate that half of all women in their forties have some degree of heart disease – and many will be unaware of it'**

Dr Justin Carter

Some branches of chains such as Boots and Lloyds will check your blood pressure, and so will many independent pharmacies – but if you're over 40 you're encouraged to go to your GP for a full heart health risk assessment that includes blood pressure and a blood test for cholesterol.

'Lifestyle changes can slow down the development of atherosclerosis, or even reverse it,' he adds. 'They'll also help to reduce your blood pressure and cholesterol – though you may also need drugs too.'

'Most people won't know they have atherosclerosis until they suffer one of these events or develop angina. But having high blood pressure and high cholesterol are clues – so get those checked by your GP or pharmacist,' advises Dr Carter.

## Difference between heart attack and stroke

**Both are usually caused by the same condition – atherosclerosis, the build-up of fatty material in the arteries**

- **Heart attack** = damage to your heart muscle when oxygen-rich blood can't reach it.
- **Stroke** = the blood supply to part of your brain is cut off, causing brain cells to become damaged or die.

## How to reduce your risk

The good news is that you can improve your heart health quite easily, says Dr Stephanie Curtis, a cardiologist at the Spire Hospital in Bristol. 'In fact, research shows that three out of four heart attacks in women aged 35 to 44 could be prevented,' she says. To help yourself you need to:

- **Quit smoking**
- **Stick to a healthy weight**
- **Do at least 150 minutes of exercise each week**
- **Ideally watch no more than seven hours of TV a week**
- **Have no more than one alcoholic drink a day**
- **Follow a healthy diet**

'I tell my patients to plan meals around vegetables and lean meat, and to avoid processed foods and too much sugar,' Dr Curtis says. 'It's also good to get plenty of healthy fats from foods such as avocados, nuts and oily fish, and to limit salt, which is linked to high blood pressure.'



### SLEEP TIGHT

**'Research shows that those who sleep five hours or less a night are twice as likely to suffer from high blood pressure and heart disease as those who sleep for seven hours or more,' says Dr Marilyn Glenville. Find a way to calm your mind (such as reading or listening to music) before bedtime, devote your bedroom to sleep and keep it cool, dark, quiet and free of any distractions such as a TV or pets. ➔**



## When to worry

Look out for these symptoms and act on them, says Dr Michael Griffith, consultant cardiologist at BMI Priory Hospital, Birmingham

**CHEST PAIN** 'There are many causes of chest pain (such as heartburn, a result of digestive juices causing internal irritation) but when it comes from the heart it behaves in a specific way – it's central, crushing and radiating to your lower jaw and sometimes your left arm. If you get this pain when you're exercising or exerting yourself and it goes as soon as you stop, it can be a sign of angina. This needs to be checked by your GP, but is not an emergency. If you get the same kind of crushing pain together with sweating, breathlessness and nausea, call 999 – these symptoms suggest a heart attack.'

**BREATHLESSNESS** 'If you become breathless when you have not been doing anything to justify it, it can be a sign of heart failure (meaning your heart is not pumping blood around the body as well as it used to) or occasionally cardiovascular disease.'

**FAINTING** 'Fainting for no good reason must be checked by a doctor as it can be a sign of heart block (an abnormal heartbeat caused by faulty wiring of the heart), which can be fatal.'

### **PALPITATIONS**

'Feeling like your heart is pounding, fluttering or beating irregularly can be triggered by a surge of adrenaline – for example, in a panic attack. It's usually harmless and not a sign of a heart problem, but if you start to experience palpitations more often, or with other symptoms such as dizziness or tightness in your chest, see your GP. It could be a sign of atrial fibrillation (AF), a major risk factor for stroke.'

**SWOLLEN ANKLES** 'These are not an emergency but do need to be checked out. They can be another sign of heart failure.'

## BE SUPPLEMENT SAVVY

Magnesium, vitamin D, CoQ10, B vitamins (including folic acid), selenium and the antioxidant vitamins A, C and E all have a protective effect on the heart. A good multivitamin and mineral supplement will have all these, such as Natural Health Practice's Healthy Woman Support, £22.97 per month ([naturalhealthpractice.com](http://naturalhealthpractice.com)). Add in an omega-3 fish oil supplement (try Natural Health Practice's Omega 3 Support, £27.77 per month), as these fats have been shown in many studies to reduce the risk of stroke and heart attack.

## IN MY CASE



**'AT JUST 37, NOBODY COULD BELIEVE I WAS AT RISK'** Rachel Boothroyd, 45, is a lawyer from York

'Eight years ago I started getting pains in my chest, arms and throat if I walked on the slightest incline. I thought I just needed to get more exercise, but working out caused crushing pain. My GP was in disbelief when I rattled off my symptoms. "I can tell by looking at you that you don't have a heart problem," she said – I was slim and appeared healthy – yet she referred me for an ECG. A follow-up angiogram (looking inside my coronary arteries) revealed a 98 per cent blockage (atherosclerosis) in the main artery to my heart. As a young woman, I was not deemed at risk but I could have been hours away from a fatal heart attack. A stent was fitted to open the artery and I have been healthy ever since, though it's sobering to know how close I came to dying.'



**'LOSING WEIGHT TURNED MY HEALTH AROUND'** Julie Marland, 49, is a cash office supervisor from Skegness

'I knew I was overweight but I didn't realise it was a health risk until I went to my GP about a pain in my foot and had my blood pressure checked as well. It was too high. Not only does weight push blood pressure up, but it's also a risk factor for heart disease and the combination makes a heart attack or stroke more likely. I always snacked on crisps and cakes, and never exercised, so I knew I had to change my lifestyle. The GP referred me to WeightWatchers and at my first meeting in July 2013, I weighed 16st 7lb – far too much for my 5ft 3in frame. I started walking 25 minutes to work and back. Every week I had my blood pressure checked and after 12 weeks, it was normal and I'd lost two stone. High blood pressure is an invisible problem and it was awful to think that I had brought it on by being inactive. I lost a total of six stone and I'm so much fitter and happier now.'



*The good news*  
is that you can  
improve your  
heart health  
quite easily

## NEWSFLASH...

The British Heart Foundation is currently leading research into a new, more sensitive blood test that could help to double the diagnoses of heart attacks in women in the future.