

bhf.org.uk



# Understanding **your heart health**



There are many ways you can improve and protect your heart health. Remember that small changes can build up to make a big difference.

In this booklet you'll find lots of tips and easy swaps, like:

You'll find space for notes on page 60. You can use them to write down swaps you want to make, or recipe ideas.

**Swap salt  
for herbs  
and spices**

**Add a side  
salad or more  
vegetables to  
your plate**

**Choose smaller  
alcohol measures,  
like a half pint or  
a small glass  
of wine**

**Try a  
meat-free  
day once  
a week**

**Walk short  
journeys instead  
of driving**

**If you smoke,  
pick a quit date  
and get friends  
and family to  
help you stick  
to it**

**Use your  
hand to  
measure your  
food portion  
sizes**

## About this booklet

You may have been given this booklet because you have a risk factor for developing heart and circulatory diseases, like high blood pressure or high cholesterol. Or maybe you'd just like to make some healthy changes.

This booklet is a starting point. It can help you find out:

- why it's important to look after your heart
- how you can look after your heart
- simple swaps and quick wins for heart health.

You may want to read this booklet in another format. Visit **bhf.org.uk/publications** to order this information in easy read, Braille or large print.



Call 0808 802 1234 (freephone)  
to speak to a nurse.  
Our helpline is open weekdays  
9am to 5pm (excluding bank  
holidays).

## Contents

About this booklet	2
Why you should look after your heart	6
Risk factors	9
How to look after your heart	15
Keeping active	16
Healthy diet	22
Reducing alcohol	44
Stopping smoking	46
Your wellbeing	48
Managing other risk factors	52
Further information	55

## Why is it important to look after my heart?

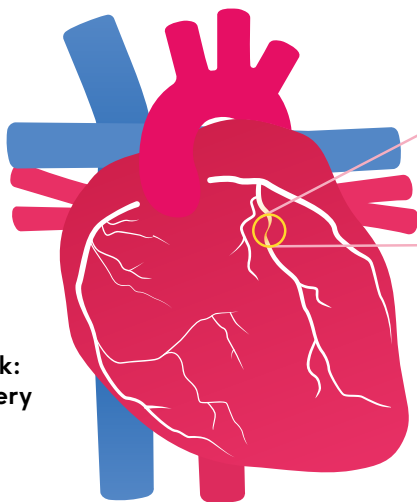
Blood vessels called arteries help carry blood to your heart, brain, lungs and the rest of your body.

Over time fatty material (called plaque or atheroma) can build up in your arteries. If too much fatty material builds up, your arteries can become damaged and blocked.

This can lead to:

- a heart attack
- a stroke
- other heart conditions.

**Heart attack:**  
blocked artery  
in the heart

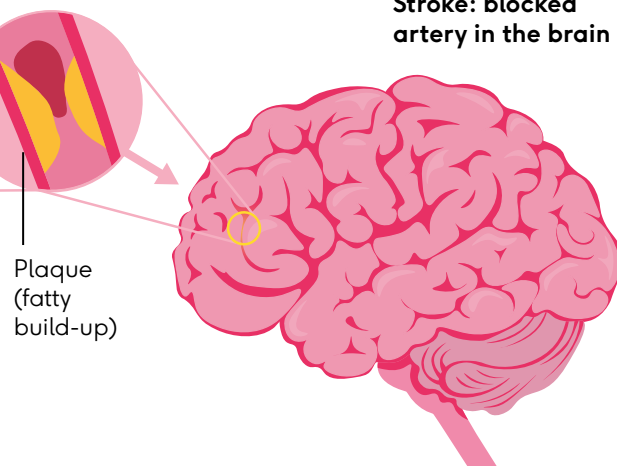


Heart and circulatory diseases, like a heart attack or stroke, are very serious. They cause a quarter of all deaths in the UK each year.

This is why it's important to take care of your heart. By making healthy choices, you can reduce the build-up of fatty material in your arteries.

The good news is there are plenty of small, easy changes you can make to protect your heart.

**Stroke: blocked  
artery in the brain**



## What are heart and circulatory diseases?

Heart and circulatory disease is any condition that affects your heart, blood vessels or circulation. Your circulation is the system that controls the flow of blood around your body.

In this booklet we're talking about reducing your risk of having these conditions, like a heart attack or stroke.

The healthy tips and information here can also help if you've had a heart attack or stroke, or you're living with a heart condition.

## What increases my risk of heart and circulatory diseases?

You may be more likely to get heart and circulatory diseases if you have risk factors. Risk factors are conditions or habits that increase your risk of developing a disease.

The good news is many heart and circulatory diseases are caused by risk factors that can be controlled, treated or changed.

There are some risk factors you cannot change. But there's lots of things you can do to reduce your risk.

Find out more about risk factors on our website: **[bhf.org.uk/riskfactors](https://bhf.org.uk/riskfactors)**

## Risk factors you cannot change



### Age

As you get older your risk of a heart attack and stroke goes up. This is because of changes to your circulatory system. For example, the inside walls of your arteries may become narrowed by the build-up of fatty material over time.



### Family history

You may have a higher risk if someone in your family has a heart and circulatory disease, like a heart attack, stroke or other heart conditions.



### Ethnic background

People from a Black African, African Caribbean and South Asian background have a higher risk of developing high blood pressure or type 2 diabetes.



### You already have a heart condition

If you're living with a heart condition, it may increase your chances of having a heart attack or stroke. Your specialist doctor or GP can tell you more about your risk.

### Transgender people

Research shows transgender (trans) people are at higher risk of a heart attack or stroke, but the reason is not clear.

If you're worried about your risk speak to your GP or call our Heart Helpline (see page 58).

You can also find more information at [bhf.org.uk/transheartrisk](https://www.bhf.org.uk/transheartrisk)

## Risk factors you can manage with lifestyle changes



### High blood pressure

High blood pressure (or hypertension) is when the pressure inside your arteries is always higher than it should be. This means your heart has to work harder to pump blood around your body.

It can damage your arteries, making them stiff and narrow, and cause fatty material to build up.



### High cholesterol

High cholesterol is when you have too much 'bad' cholesterol in your blood. It causes fatty material to build up in your arteries.



### Type 2 diabetes

Type 2 diabetes happens when your body does not make enough of a hormone called insulin. It causes high levels of glucose in your blood and can damage your arteries.



### Smoking

The chemicals in cigarettes and other smoking products like shisha and chewing tobacco damage your blood vessels, including the arteries that carry blood to your heart and brain.



### Diet

Eating foods high in saturated fat, sugar and salt can lead to weight gain, high blood pressure, high cholesterol and type 2 diabetes.



### Alcohol

Drinking too much alcohol can increase your risk of having a heart attack or stroke. It can also lead to vascular dementia, arrhythmia (abnormal heart rhythms), heart failure and type 2 diabetes.



### Physical inactivity

Not moving enough during the day can increase your chances of developing high blood pressure, high cholesterol and type 2 diabetes.



### **Stress**

Feeling stressed will not lead to heart and circulatory diseases. But it can make you more likely to make choices that are bad for your health, like over-eating or drinking more alcohol.



### **Weight**

Living with excess weight or obesity increases your cholesterol levels and blood pressure. You're also more likely to develop type 2 diabetes.

If you're worried about your heart and would like more information on risk factors, speak to your GP.

If you're over 40 you can try this tool to find out your heart age. It will give you an idea of what your heart age might be and how to improve it.

Find out your heart age at  
**[bhf.org.uk/heartage](https://bhf.org.uk/heartage)**

## **What can I do to look after my heart?**

There are lots of small changes you can make today to lower your risk.

You could pick one lifestyle swap from each of the following sections or commit to making one swap a week. Remember that small changes build up to make a big difference.

Give yourself time. By making lots of smaller changes you're more likely to stick to them.

You might not see a difference overnight, but you should soon notice you're sleeping better and have more energy.

We have lots of delicious, healthy, free recipes on our website:  
**[bhf.org.uk/recipefinder](https://bhf.org.uk/recipefinder)**



## Move more

Staying active is important to improve and protect your heart health. It can also help:



**maintain a healthy weight**



**give you more energy**



**reduce anxiety**



**improve your sleep**



**boost your mood.**



Staying active does not have to mean running a marathon or spending hours at the gym.

Lots of activities can get you moving, like walking, playing with kids or grandkids, gardening, or housework.



Do something that makes you:

- breathe harder
- feel warmer
- feel your heart beat faster.

To look after your heart, you should aim to be active every day. Adults should try to do 150 minutes a week (around 20 to 30 minutes of exercise a day).



There are lots of ways to build exercise into your day.

- ✓ Get off the bus one stop early and walk the rest of the way.
- ✓ Walk to and from the station or school run instead of driving.
- ✓ Do some squats or lunges while you're waiting for the kettle to boil.
- ✓ Get into a routine of walking each day, like at lunchtime.
- ✓ Try a new hobby or class, like gardening, yoga or park run.
- ✓ If you can, use the stairs instead of a lift.

“

When out and about I will take the stairs instead of the escalator. Over time you get fitter and healthier and getting up the stairs gets easier.

Courtney

“

Planning my day  
ahead keeps  
me positive  
and focused on  
realistic goals,  
such as a daily  
walk outside  
for fresh air.

Sarah

Many people find that exercise is a great way to meet new people, catch up with friends or have time to themselves. It can give you a break from your busy day.

Find more ways to sneak exercise into your day at **bhf.org.uk/sneak-exercise**

You'll find lots of tips and tricks for getting active at **bhf.org.uk/activity**

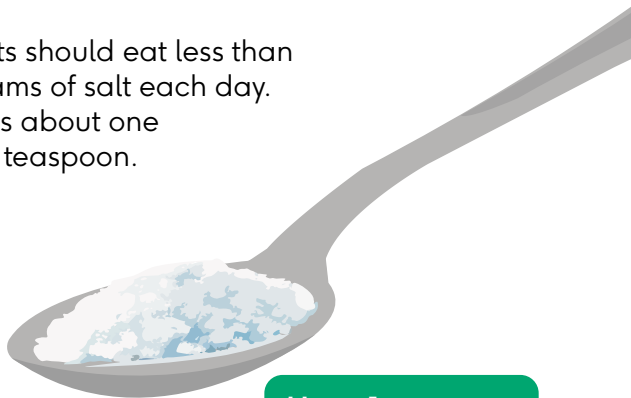
If you're not sure where to start, or you're finding exercise difficult, talk to your GP. They may be able to recommend local exercise schemes.

If you have a heart condition, side effects from medicine and treatment may make it harder to exercise. The NHS has exercises for all abilities at **nhs.uk/live-well/exercise**

## Have less salt

Cutting down on the amount of salt you eat is an important change you can make to improve your heart health. Too much salt can cause high blood pressure and increase your risk of a heart attack or stroke.

Adults should eat less than 6 grams of salt each day. That's about one level teaspoon.



**Up to 1 teaspoon  
= (6g) salt a day**

It can help to know what you're looking for. Here are some foods that are high in salt:

- soy, hoisin and fish sauce
- miso
- ready-made sauces
- processed meat, like bacon and sausages
- some cheeses, like halloumi and feta
- salted nuts and crisps.

There are lots of ways to cut down on the amount of salt you have. You'll soon get used to less salt.

- ✓ Remove salt from your table and taste your food before adding salt.
- ✓ Add less salt to your food. Usually there's already salt in the food you buy.
- ✓ Look for low-salt, reduced-salt or low-sodium options in your food shop.
- ✓ Ditch ready-made rubs and sauces and make them yourself with less salt.

- ✓ Use herbs and spices for flavour, instead of adding extra salt.
- ✓ Swap salty snacks, like salted peanuts and crisps, for unsalted nuts and less salty alternatives.

If you have a heart condition you may need to avoid salt substitutes. Some salt substitutes can be very high in potassium so they're not recommended.

You can find free, tasty, low-salt recipes on our website: [bhf.org.uk/low-salt-recipes](https://www.bhf.org.uk/low-salt-recipes)

“

To make up for the reduced salt, I use more spices. I grind my own spice mix or make a spice paste with fresh ginger and onions.

Joyce

## Have less sugar

Another way to look after your heart is to have less sugar. Whether you have a sweet tooth or not, you may be having too much sugar.

Adults should try to have less than 30g of sugar a day. That's about 7 cubes of sugar, or around 7 teaspoons.



Up to 7 cubes  
= (30g) of  
sugar a day

There's also sugar in a lot of everyday foods that you would not expect, like:

- granola
- sauces, like ketchup and barbecue (BBQ)
- jam and spreads, like marmalade
- flavoured yoghurts
- breakfast biscuits or bars
- mithai (a type of sweet)
- halwa (a type of dessert)
- fruit juice
- sports drinks
- baked beans.

You can find no added sugar versions of some of these foods, which are a better option for your health. Check the labels for foods with low or no added sugar.

Try some of our tips for cutting down on sugar.

- ✓ Avoid foods high in added sugar, like breakfast bars and ready-made sauces.
- ✓ Swap flavoured yoghurt for plain, low-fat yoghurt.
- ✓ Have sugar-free drinks instead of sugar sweetened fizzy drinks and squash.
- ✓ Replace sugary cereals with plain, wholegrain cereals.
- ✓ Have less sugar, or no sugar, in your tea and coffee.

Your taste buds quickly get used to having less sugar.

Find more ways to cut back on sugar without noticing at [bhf.org.uk/cut-sugar](https://www.bhf.org.uk/cut-sugar)

## Watch out for saturated fat

Looking out for foods high in saturated fat can help you make healthier food choices and reduce your cholesterol.

Swap foods high in saturated fats for lower ones, see page 29.

You may also want to order our **Eat better** booklet for more tips on how to make healthier food choices. Order or read it online at [bhf.org.uk/eatbetter-booklet](https://bhf.org.uk/eatbetter-booklet)

### Healthy tip

A good starting point for eating healthier is to look at how you cook your food. Try grilling, boiling or baking your food instead of frying it to use less oil.

Cheeses	Swap with	Reduced fat cheese
Milk	Swap with	Semi-skimmed, 1% or skimmed
Butter, ghee or margarine	Swap with	Vegetable or olive oil spreads
Red and processed meat	Swap with	Chicken (without the skin) or fish
Cakes	Swap with	Malt loaf
Crisps	Swap with	A small handful of unsalted nuts or popcorn
Coconut or palm oil	Swap with	Olive, rapeseed or sunflower oil
Coconut cream or milk	Swap with	Plain yoghurt
Paneer	Swap with	Firm tofu



## Look at food labels

Always read the label on packaged food. A good rule is to try to eat foods with mostly green and amber labels. The label should have information on portion size too.

Using the food label card on page 31 can help you work out if a food is high (red), medium (orange) or low (green) amounts for fat, saturated fat, sugars and salt. Cut it out and take it with you when you go food shopping.



## Food labelling guide

	Fat	Saturates	Sugars	Salt
<b>Low</b> Healthier choice	3g or less	1.5g or less	5g or less	0.3g or less
<b>Medium</b> Ok most of the time	3.1g to 17.5g	1.6g to 5g	5.1g to 22.5g	0.31g to 1.5g
<b>High</b> Just occasionally	More than 17.5g	More than 5g	More than 22.5g	More than 1.5g

All measures per 100g

Cut out and keep



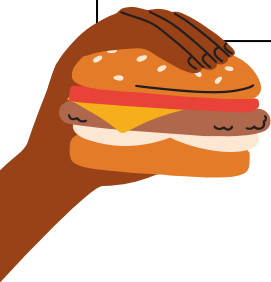
Why not listen to our healthy eating information on the go?

Listen to our helpful food tips and learn more about a balanced diet at

**bhf.org.uk/healthyeating**

### **Vegetarian and vegan alternatives**

Some meat-free choices like vegetarian or vegan nuggets, burgers and sausages can be high in salt, saturated fat and calories. Always remember to check the food label.



## **Ultra-processed foods**

Ultra-processed foods are processed foods that have ingredients not normally used in home cooking. For example, preservatives, emulsifiers, sweeteners, artificial colours and flavours.

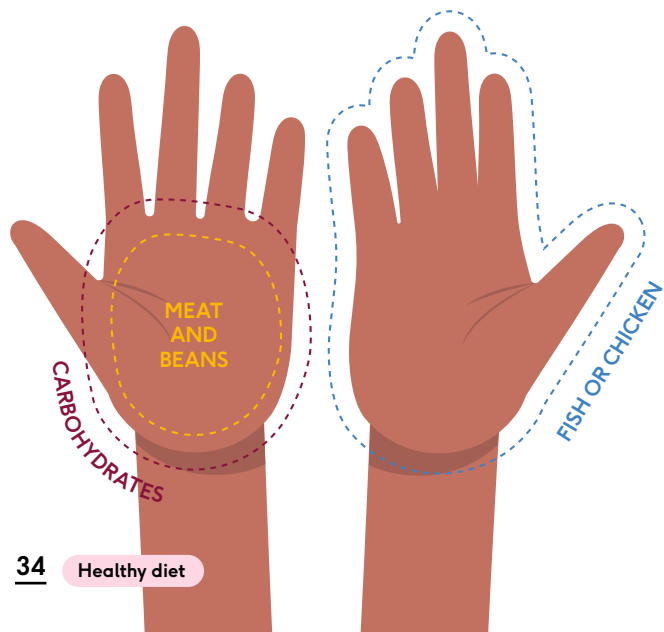
If you're thinking about healthier food choices, the focus should be to have less saturated fat, salt and sugar. By doing this, you'll usually be cutting down on ultra-processed foods at the same time.

Find out more about ultra-processed foods at **bhf.org.uk/ultra-processed**

## Look at your portion sizes

A healthy diet is not just about what you eat, it's also about how much you eat. Getting portion sizes right is an important part of eating well and keeping to a healthy weight.

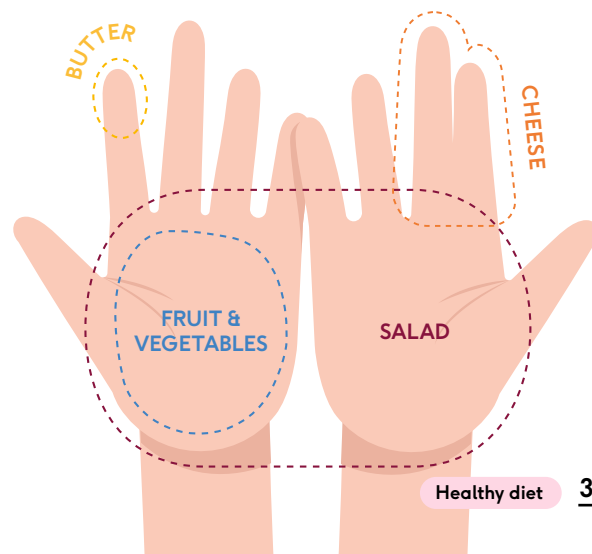
A quick and easy way to measure portions is to use your hand.



Tips for getting the right portion size:

- ✓ If you cook a big dinner, put leftovers into a food container straight away so you're not tempted to eat more than you need.
- ✓ Use a smaller plate to stop yourself from overloading your plate.
- ✓ If you're still feeling hungry, wait for 20 minutes before eating more. It can take a little while to feel full after eating.

Find more tips to help you manage your portion sizes at [bhf.org.uk/portionsize](https://www.bhf.org.uk/portionsize)

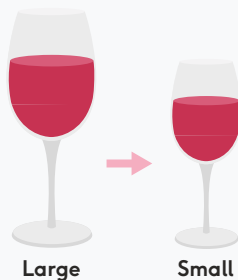


## Cut down rather than cut out

Sometimes when people want to feel healthier, they will cut out all sugar or processed foods. This can be difficult to maintain, because it's such a big change.

Instead, why not try cutting down on some of the unhealthy food you eat? Over time you can reduce it again.

Find the simple changes you can make to your favourite takeaway in our **Eat better** booklet. Order or read it online at [bhf.org.uk/eatbetter-booklet](https://bhf.org.uk/eatbetter-booklet)



- ✓ Eat your favourite daily treat like crisps or chocolate, once every other day at first. You could swap it for fruit or a small handful of unsalted nuts.
- ✓ Drink smaller alcohol measures, like half a pint, a single spirit measure or a small glass of wine.
- ✓ Swap some of your dishes when ordering a takeaway for healthier versions, like having chicken instead of lamb or pork.
- ✓ Have less, like one sugar in your tea and coffee instead of two.
- ✓ Measure the amount of oil you use when you're cooking to use less.

## Weekly Meal Plan

	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun
Breakfast	on milk	on milk			on milk		
Lunch			on milk	on milk		on milk	
Dinner	on milk			on milk	on milk	on milk	on milk

### Shopping list

low-fat milk  
lean meats  
tinned fruit  
reduced fat cheese  
tinned tomatoes  
rapeseed oil  
wholemeal bread

## Plan your meals

Planning out your meals for the week ahead can make healthy choices easier. It can also help you save time, money and reduce food waste.

You could write your meals down on a calendar or planner, so you know what you're eating each day (see page 42).

You can also save time by batch cooking and freezing meals, like soups and stews. That way you're not going to be tempted by unhealthy options because you've got nothing else prepared.

By buying all the ingredients you need for the week, you'll have more choice over your portion sizes, food choices and quality. For example, larger supermarkets may have more reduced sugar and low-salt options.

Find out how to meal plan at [bhf.org.uk/mealplan](https://bhf.org.uk/mealplan)

# Weekly meal plan

	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun
Breakfast	Porridge and fruit	Boiled egg and wholemeal toast	Low-fat Greek yoghurt and fruit	Overnight oats with low-fat Greek yoghurt and fruit	Poached egg, mushrooms and wholemeal toast	Low-fat Greek yoghurt and fruit	No added sugar muesli and fruit
Lunch	Vegetable soup	Jacket potato and beans	Potato and leek soup	Tomato and mushroom omelette	Tuna salad	Piri piri chicken and wild rice	Jacket potato with leftover Bolognese or bean chilli
Dinner	Baked cod with rice and salad	Beetroot risotto	Vegetable frittata	Chicken and veg traybake	Lean mince Bolognese	Bean chilli with wholemeal wrap and salad	Chicken and leek pasta bake

**Snacks** Bananas, apples, unsalted nuts and plain popcorn.

# Weekly meal plan

	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun
Breakfast							
Lunch							
Dinner							

Snacks

## Drink less alcohol

Cutting down on the alcohol you drink can help maintain a healthy weight, improve your sleep and help protect your heart.

Adults should aim to have no more than 14 units a week. That's about:



Drinking can be a big part of socialising, or your weekly routine. But there are ways to make easy, manageable swaps to cut down.

Try having:

- ✓ a half pint instead of a pint
- ✓ a small glass of wine instead of a large glass
- ✓ a small wine spritzer (with soda water) instead of a large glass of wine
- ✓ a single measure of spirits with diet mixer instead of a double
- ✓ alcohol-free and low-alcohol beers, wine or spirits.

Order our **Eat better** booklet for more tips on healthier drinking choices. Order or read it online at [bhf.org.uk/eatbetter-booklet](https://bhf.org.uk/eatbetter-booklet)

## Stop smoking

It's never too late to quit. There are lots of benefits to not smoking, like:



**having more energy**



**breathing easier**



**improved fitness**



**better sense of smell and taste**



**reduced risk of a heart attack or stroke.**

After one year of quitting smoking, your risk of having a heart attack is half that of a smoker.

You can find lots of support and information to help you quit online. You may find these tips helpful.

- ✓ Set a quit date and tell your friends and family to help you stick to it.
- ✓ Have healthy snacks and drinks to help with unhealthy cravings.
- ✓ Use the money you save by not buying cigarettes to get yourself a reward at milestones.

Do not be afraid to ask for help. Speak to your GP or local pharmacy for help to stop smoking.

The NHS has a free stop smoking service to help you boost your chances of quitting. Search '**NHS stop smoking**'.



## Find ways to help with stress

It might feel more difficult to manage stress. But there are lots of ways to reduce stress and feel more relaxed. You could:



try relaxing exercises,  
like yoga or meditation



take up a new hobby



download an app to help  
manage stress or listen  
to music and podcasts



spend time with family,  
friends or pets



practice breathing exercises,  
find out more at [bhf.org.uk/  
breathing-exercises](https://bhf.org.uk/breathing-exercises)

“

Yoga naturally slows  
things down – it  
slows your breathing  
and heart rate,  
and helps with  
relaxation, making  
you feel less anxious  
and stressed.

Sad

“

I like to drift off  
[to sleep] reading  
a book or listening  
to an audiobook.  
Meditating every  
morning and  
evening also helps  
me stay calm.

Sarah

Speak to friends and family if you feel comfortable, they can be a great source of support.

If you feel anxious or sad a lot of the time, and it's affecting your daily life, talk to your GP. Do not be afraid to ask for help. Sometimes you need to put yourself first. Many people feel much better once they've asked for help.

You can also refer yourself to the NHS for talking therapies, like cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) or counselling. Search '**NHS talking therapies**' for more information.

The charity Mind also offer support to anyone affected by their mental health. Visit **mind.org.uk**

## Maintain a healthy weight

We know how hard it can be to lose weight and stick to new lifestyle changes. Many of the tips in this booklet will help to manage your weight and look after your heart.

Being a healthy weight is about watching your portion sizes, swapping some less healthy foods or snacks for healthier ones, avoiding packaged foods labelled in red, and being physically active.

Whatever your reasons are for wanting to lose weight, now is a great time to start. We're here to help and support you every step of the way. Visit [bhf.org.uk/myweight](https://bhf.org.uk/myweight)

## High blood pressure, cholesterol and diabetes

You can find more information on these risk factors and how to manage them online or in other booklets. We have lots of information to support you.

You can visit [bhf.org.uk/publications](https://bhf.org.uk/publications) to order free printed booklets.



### High cholesterol

Read our **Understanding high cholesterol** booklet or visit [bhf.org.uk/cholesterol](https://bhf.org.uk/cholesterol)



### High blood pressure

Read our **Understanding high blood pressure** booklet or visit [bhf.org.uk/bloodpressure](https://bhf.org.uk/bloodpressure)

We also have information on high blood pressure and high cholesterol in audio format and other languages.

Read or listen to our information online  
**bhf.org.uk/infoforall**

## Type 2 diabetes

Visit **diabetes.org.uk** to find more information on managing diabetes.

Diabetes UK have an easy-to-use healthy eating guide suggesting healthier food choices for people from African, Caribbean and South Asian communities. Search '**Healthier eating**' at **diabetes.org.uk**

## I'm ready to make more changes

If you feel ready to take the next step in looking after your heart, there's lots of information to support you.

It's important to find information that's trusted. Here are some places you can go.

## British Heart Foundation (BHF)

### Read our trusted information

We have lots of information about looking after your heart. Why not try one of our other booklets, like **Eat better?**

You can read or order it online for free at **bhf.org.uk/publications**

We also have heart health and lifestyle information in other formats.

Listen on the go, read our Braille or easy read booklets or find health information in your language.

Search **bhf.org.uk/infoforall** to find out more.

### Sign up to Heart Matters

Join to receive our free magazine or email newsletter, featuring expert tips, heart-healthy recipes, inspiring stories, and the latest updates backed by BHF funded science.

Guided by our team of experts, Heart Matters helps you to make small changes for a healthier heart.

Subscribe to Heart Matters at **bhf.org.uk/heartmatters**

## NHS

The NHS has lots of information online to help you keep fit, quit smoking and make healthier choices.

Explore their healthy living hub for trusted information at **nhs.uk/live-well**

### Where to go for more help

Thinking about changes to your daily life can feel overwhelming, and you may not know where to start. But the small changes in this booklet can make a big difference. In time you'll feel more confident in managing your health.

The British Heart Foundation can help you find more information on looking after your heart. We have lots of simple food swaps and manageable changes for you and your family.

Search **bhf.org.uk/hmmag**

## Call the Heart Helpline

If you're not sure where to go next, our cardiac nurses can help you with your questions or concerns.



Call 0808 802 1234 (freephone)  
or email [hearthelpline@bhf.org.uk](mailto:hearthelpline@bhf.org.uk)  
Our helpline is open weekdays,  
9am to 5pm (excluding  
bank holidays).

“

At my age I want  
to be healthy and  
now I feel better  
and I have more  
energy. Make small  
changes over  
the weeks until it  
becomes the norm.

Courtney

[illegible][illegible]

[illegible]



# We are British Heart Foundation



Through research, information and support we're here for everyone affected by heart and circulatory conditions.

## Get help

Speak to one of our experienced cardiac nurses for more information and support. They can help answer your questions, big or small.

You can call **0808 802 1234** (freephone). Our helpline is open weekdays, 9am to 5pm (excluding bank holidays).

## Support our work

If you've found this information helpful and would like to support our work, please scan the QR code or visit **bhf.org.uk/support-us**



Scan here with  
the camera  
on your phone

Last updated November 2024. HIS4A6/0624

© British Heart Foundation 2024,  
a registered charity in England and Wales  
(225971) and Scotland (SC039426).

