Cardiovascular disease (CVD) is one of the possible long-term complications of diabetes. Because of this link, it can be very worrying for some people with diabetes. This information sheet is a starting point to finding out more about CVD – what it is and how you can reduce your risk of developing it.

What is CVD?
CVD includes heart disease, stroke and all other diseases of the heart and circulation.

What causes CVD?
The body’s blood vessels and arteries allow blood to circulate and supply the body with the oxygen and nutrients that it needs. In CVD, fatty deposits (plaque) form in the lining of the blood vessels and arteries. As well as forming clots (thrombosis) fatty deposits, can narrow the arteries and blood vessels and clots can block them completely.

The result is that areas of the body can become starved of the oxygen and nutrients they need. For example, if an artery leading to the heart becomes blocked, it can cause a heart attack. If this happens to an artery leading to the brain it may cause a stroke. Narrowing or blockage in the legs (and sometimes arms) is known as peripheral vascular disease and can increase the chance of gangrene and amputation.

Why does having diabetes increase my risk of CVD
People with diabetes have an increased risk of CVD compared with those without because prolonged, poorly controlled blood glucose levels affect the lining of the body’s arterial walls. This increases the likelihood of furring up of the vessels, forming a narrowing (atherosclerosis).

How can I tell if I have it?
The early stages of CVD are difficult to diagnose. If your heart vessels are only partially blocked then you may have angina (a tightness of the chest) or if you have a narrowing of the blood vessels in your legs then this can cause you to have pain in your leg/s when you walk. It’s worth asking your healthcare team about your personal risk of CVD.

How can I reduce the risk of CVD?
The good news is that there are many things that can help to reduce your risk of CVD.

- Ensure you have a diabetes annual review where your blood pressure, blood fats and blood glucose control can be checked. These are all linked to your risk of developing CVD.
- If you smoke, seek advice and support to stop smoking. Your healthcare team can explain the options available to you.
- Get active and keep active.
- Take your medications as prescribed.
• Eat a healthy diet – plenty of fruit and vegetables, low in saturated fat, include more wholegrains, and aim for oily fish twice a week.
• If you are overweight, losing weight can also reduce your risk of CVD. Ask to be referred to a registered dietitian for more information.

For further reading on this subject you may be interested in our other Diabetes UK resources:
Cardiovascular disease and diabetes booklet
Understanding diabetes.
On how you can obtain a copy see details below.

Important points to remember:

To reduce the risks against long-term complications, carefully manage your diabetes by:
• keeping blood fats, blood pressure and cholesterol levels as near normal as possible.
• Attending your annual diabetes review.

For information covering a variety of diabetes-related topics see our full range of information sheets, produced in 20 languages, available by downloading them from our website, www.diabetes.org.uk/languages

The Diabetes UK Catalogue describes our full range of books and leaflets. For a copy of our catalogue and any of the leaflets quoted in this information sheet, call Diabetes UK Distribution: 0800 585 088.

For support and information about diabetes please call Diabetes UK Careline: 0845 120 2960 (charged at local rate). A translation service is available. Open Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm.