This is one of the booklets in the Heart Information Series. For a complete list of booklets, see page 25.

We welcome your comments on this booklet. Please fill in the feedback form on page 41.

We update this booklet regularly. However, you may find more recent information on our website: bhh.nhs.uk.
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About this booklet

If you have coronary heart disease or high blood pressure, or if you have just had heart surgery, your hospital doctor, cardiac nurse or GP may already have advised you to do more physical activity.

This booklet explains:

- why physical activity is important for your heart, even if you already have coronary heart disease
- how physical activity affects your heart
- how much activity you should aim to do
- which sorts of activities are best for your heart, and
- how you can safely build up your level of activity.

Physical activity might involve going swimming, doing an exercise class, or playing a sport. But it also includes everyday things such as walking, gardening and climbing stairs. You can gain the benefits of activity from all these types of physical activity.

This booklet is not a substitute for the advice your doctor or cardiologist (heart specialist) may give you based on his or her knowledge of your condition.
The good news

Physical activity is very good news for your heart.

- Physical activity halves the risk of developing coronary heart disease.
- Among people who have heart attacks, those who have been physically active are more likely to survive the heart attack compared with people who have not been active.
- Physical activity as part of a rehabilitation programme reduces the risk of dying after a heart attack.
- Physical activity reduces the risk of having a stroke.
- It helps lower blood pressure.
- It reduces the chance of developing diabetes.
- If you already have diabetes, physical activity can help you to control it.
- It helps you to lose weight if you are overweight.

Physical activity also improves your health in other ways. It can:

- make you feel more energetic
- relieve stress
- lower the risk of osteoporosis (thinning of the bones)
- help you to relax, and
- help older people to stay independent, or become more independent.
The people who benefit the most are inactive people who start to take regular moderate exercise, such as brisk walking, cycling or dancing. Also, there is no particular level of activity that you have to reach before you can benefit – a little activity is better than none! And the benefits will start to come as soon as you start being more active.

You don’t have to go to a gym, or play sports, or use special equipment. You can become more active just by working more activity into your everyday life.

Many people who do regular physical activity say that it makes them feel better, and that they notice an improvement in their mood and self-confidence. It can also be sociable and a lot of fun.
What causes coronary heart disease?

Coronary heart disease is caused when the arteries that supply blood to the heart (the coronary arteries) become narrowed by a gradual build-up of fatty material within their walls. This process is called 'atherosclerosis' and the fatty material is called 'atheroma'.

This can cause angina – an uncomfortable feeling in the chest, which may spread to the arms, neck, jaw, back or stomach. Or it may affect just the neck, jaw, arm or stomach. Angina happens when the coronary arteries become so narrow that not enough blood can reach the heart muscle. As a result, the heart muscle does not get enough oxygen – especially when its demands are high, for example when you are exerting yourself.

Coronary heart disease can suddenly become worse if a blood clot forms over the atheroma (a thrombosis). This is what causes a heart attack.

Atherosclerosis develops when the cells in the walls of the coronary arteries take up cholesterol. This cholesterol is formed mainly from the fats in the foods you eat. Two types of cholesterol are involved.