Physical activity and your heart

BEATING HEART DISEASE TOGETHER
About the British Heart Foundation

The British Heart Foundation (BHF) is the nation’s heart charity, dedicated to saving lives through pioneering research, patient care, campaigning for change, and providing vital information.

We rely on donations of time and money to continue our life-saving work. If you would like to make a donation, please:

• call our donation hotline on **0300 330 3322**
• visit **bhf.org.uk/give** or
• post it to us at the address on the back cover.

For other ways to support our work, and for up-to-date information on heart disease, the BHF and our services, see **bhf.org.uk**

Together we can beat heart disease.
About this booklet

This booklet is for people who have a heart condition, and for those who are at a high risk of developing heart disease, for example because they have high blood pressure or a high cholesterol level.

In most cases, physical activity can:

• help improve your heart health if you already have a heart condition
• help your recovery after having heart surgery or a heart attack, and
• help improve many of the ‘risk factors’ which increase the overall risk of coronary heart disease. (We explain more about risk factors on page 18.)

This booklet explains:

• why physical activity is so important for the heart
• how much activity adults should generally aim to do
• which sorts of activity are best for your heart, and
• how to get started and keep going.

It also gives some information about physical activity for people who already have particular heart conditions, and for those who have recently had treatment for their condition, such as heart surgery or an angioplasty, or who
have had a pacemaker or ICD fitted.

This booklet does not replace the advice that the health professionals looking after you may give you, but it should help you to understand what they tell you.
Why is physical activity so important for my heart?

The heart, like any other muscle, needs physical activity to help keep it in good condition.

The good news

• Physical activity can help to reduce the risk of getting coronary heart disease.
• If you have high blood pressure, a high cholesterol level or diabetes, physical activity can help to improve these conditions and help protect your heart.
• If you already have coronary heart disease (if you get angina or have had a heart attack), physical activity can help protect your heart and help to reduce your risk of having further heart problems.
• If you have another type of heart condition, regular physical activity can benefit your overall heart health.
• If you have recently had a heart attack or heart surgery, regular physical activity can help with your recovery.
Other benefits of physical activity

Regular physical activity can also help to improve health in other ways. The benefits can include:

- improving strength, flexibility and balance
- improving body shape and appearance
- having more energy
- improving mood
- helping to reduce stress and anxiety
- helping you to relax, and
- sleeping better.

It also helps to prevent osteoporosis (thinning of the bones) and some cancers.

Physical activity has particular benefits for older people. It can help prevent falls, and can help you stay mobile and independent as you get older. It also helps to slow down
the progression of osteoporosis.

As well as protecting your health, many people find that physical activity can help to improve their self-confidence and their social life, as it’s a way of meeting other people and having a good time.
What type of activity will help my heart, and how much should I aim to do?

The best type of activity to keep your heart healthy is aerobic activity. Aerobic activity is any repetitive, rhythmic movement that involves large muscle groups such as the legs, shoulders and arms – for example, walking or cycling. When you do an aerobic activity, your body needs more oxygen and so your heart and lungs have to work harder. This makes the heart and circulation more efficient. Aerobic activity also helps to develop your stamina.

Examples of aerobic activity include:

• brisk walking
• cycling
• aerobics
• dancing, and
• climbing the stairs.

Building activity into your everyday routine

You don’t have to join a gym or buy expensive equipment to get the benefits of activity. You can improve your health just by fitting more activity into your everyday life.
• Walk to the local shops rather than taking the bus or car.
• Park further away from the entrance to the supermarket than you would usually.
• Use the stairs instead of the lift or escalator.
• Get off the bus one stop earlier and walk the rest of the way.
• Walk with your children or grandchildren instead of taking the car or bus.
• Do some gardening.

Other ways of becoming more active

Some people enjoy going to classes or groups to exercise. This can help you feel motivated and can be more fun than exercising on your own. Many local authorities and community groups run activity programmes, fitness classes and walking groups for different ages. To find out what’s available in your local area, ask at your local library, leisure centre or community centre. Some people prefer to join a gym. However, if you want to use a gym or do exercise classes, you should check with your doctor that the activities are suitable for you and your heart condition.
How much activity should I aim to do?

You should aim to do some activity every day.

Over a week, you should do a total of at least 150 minutes (2½ hours) of moderate-intensity activity. Moderate-intensity activity means activity that makes you feel warmer and breathe harder, and makes your heart beat faster than usual, but you should still be able to carry on a conversation. You can do the 150 minutes in bouts of 10 minutes or more. One way to achieve the 150 minutes is to do 30 minutes’ activity on five days a week.

As well as the 150 minutes of moderate-intensity activity a week, you should also do some activity to improve your muscle strength on at least two days a week. We explain more about this on the next page.

If you’re over 65, you should also do some activity to improve your balance and co-ordination on at least two days a week, to help reduce the risk of falls. We explain more about this type of activity on the next page.

Some people may not be able to do much activity. However, some activity is better than none and can still benefit your heart health. A good way to start is to aim to do some 10-minute sessions of moderate-intensity physical activity. If you’re not sure about how much activity you should aim to do, check with your doctor.
Activities for muscle strength

You should do physical activity to improve your muscle strength on at least two days a week. This is in addition to the recommended 150 minutes’ activity a week.

As well as improving muscle strength, these activities also help with good posture and balance. And they can help with your body shape, improving the way you look and feel.

Examples of activities for muscle strength include using resistance bands, climbing stairs, digging the garden, lifting and carrying shopping, pilates, yoga, Tai Chi and lifting weights.

Activities for balance and co-ordination

If you’re over 65, you should also do some physical activity to improve your balance and co-ordination on at least two days a week. This will help reduce your risk of falls.

Balance and co-ordination activities include dancing (for example, ballroom or line dancing), Tai Chi, rambling, cycling, bowls, and exercise classes that include standing and moving exercises.

Some activities – such as dancing and cycling will improve your balance and co-ordination and may also