

Some heart facts

When something works as hard as your heart does to keep you alive, it deserves some looking after. Here are some heart facts...

When I decided to find out more about the heart I discovered some startling facts and realised it was time to make some important changes in my lifestyle.

Your heart is a powerful muscle which has the vital job of pumping blood around. This enables nutrients and oxygen to reach every cell in your body whilst taking toxins and waste products away.

There are a staggering 60,000 – 100,000 miles of arteries, veins and capillaries to pump approximately 5.6 litres of blood through. You could have as many as 50,000 million capillaries penetrating every part of your body. Your heart has to get blood to every nook and cranny to keep it alive.

It does this so efficiently that your blood circulates around your system in as little as 20 seconds. So every minute of every day your blood moves around your body three times and can travel thousands of

miles. We think that deserves some respect!

Your heart beats at a rate of about 60 to 80 times a minute – the average is about 70. In one day it will beat 10,000 times and in

“Your heart pumps blood through more than 60,000 miles of vessels and 50,000 million capillaries!”

one year about 3.5 million times. This means that during an average lifetime of 70 years your heart will beat 250 million times. That’s a lot of hard work, yet most of us mistreat our heart and many of us don’t even know where it is, exactly!

Hand on your heart

An adult’s heart weighs about 8-10oz and is about the size of a clenched fist, so make a fist and put your hand on your heart right now. Like most people you’ve probably placed your fist on the left-hand side of

your chest. In fact your heart is found almost in the centre, but the bottom is tipped towards the left so you’re more aware of your heart beat here.

The good news is you can make positive changes to your lifestyle to look after your heart, and some are easy enough to start now.

Making changes

As with all muscles your heart will get weaker if you don’t use it. It’s been shown that exercise can reduce your risk of heart disease by as much as 40%. You’ll need to perform aerobic exercise, which is the type that makes you slightly breathless and raises your pulse. You don’t have to don your lycra and join a gym if that’s not your scene – you’ll be more successful if you find an activity you enjoy and do it with friends. So if you fancy getting out those dancing shoes and practising your footwork – anything to get you moving more – it will help. If you haven’t exercised

for a while, see your GP first, but try to build up to 30 minutes, five times a week, starting with smaller more manageable chunks at first.

The more we weigh the harder our hearts have to work, so trying to stay within healthy weight limits makes sense, too. Start by cutting down on saturated fats – they're found in animal products and are turned into

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cholesterol by your liver. In particular cut down on red meat, trim off any visible fat and avoid fast food and meat products such as burgers and sausages. Grill, don't fry and switch to low fat dairy products. It's a positive change you can make today.

The good news is that fats such as those found in olive oil and oily fish are good for you, and research has shown that people who eat a Mediterranean diet could be 25% less likely of dying prematurely. It's tasty too and you'll find that your taste buds will soon adapt to the new foods.

Foods that improve your health include wholegrains, beans, pulses and plenty of

fresh fruit and veg. Colourful fruit and vegetables are full of antioxidants. The red of a tomato, the orange of a carrot and green of broccoli are all natural colours good for your heart and health.

Salt is another danger lurking particularly in processed foods and ready meals. More than 1.25g of salt per 100g in a particular food or product is high. One study showed that if people over 60 cut their salt intake to 6g (that's one teaspoon) a day, they can reduce their risk of stroke by 31% and risk of heart attack by 24% very quickly. So surely it must be worth doing! And again your taste buds will soon adapt to what tastes a bit strange initially.

Whilst drinking small amounts of alcohol can have a beneficial effect, smoking just three to six cigarettes a day can double your risk of heart attack. The chemicals in cigarette smoke increase cholesterol and could explain 20% of heart attacks.

It's a good idea to control your stress levels, too, but you'll already have the perfect antidote to stress in your knitting and cross stitching so this is one activity you can get going on straight away!

A lesson learned

The people of the Japanese island, Okinawa have five times less heart disease through eating a healthy diet, taking regular exercise and

nurturing a strong sense of community. We should all take a leaf from their book for a healthier future.

Step by step

Not all of us will be able to make all these changes, but even a few will help. Remember it's always easier with the support of friends, so use the Stitchlinks Forum to chat to others who are making important changes in their lives too. Start small and grow from there, and don't forget to let us know how you get on.

Did you know?

Flossing your teeth regularly will not only ensure your teeth and mouth are in good health, but you'll have a healthy heart, too!

There is a well established link between gum disease, heart disease and stroke. The bacteria that lurk in the plaque on your teeth, together with the toxins they produce, have easy access to your bloodstream.

Dr Michael Roizen of the University of Chicago states that keeping your gums healthy could add 6.4 years to your life!

That's a positive change we can all make today!

Quick tips for a healthier heart

- **Get your blood pressure tested** – high blood pressure has no symptoms, so the only way to find out if your blood pressure is too high is to get tested.
- **Get your cholesterol tested** – high levels will clog up your arteries including the vessels that supply your heart. Saturated fat found in foods such as cream, butter, full fat milk, fried food and red meat are the main culprits, so cut down on these. Aerobic exercise can also help to lower your cholesterol levels.
- **Eat a healthy diet**
 - Cut down on saturated fats.
 - Switch to ‘good’ fats such as those found in olive oil, sunflower oils and fish oils.
 - Cut down on transfats – read your labels as these are hidden dangers found in many margarines and processed snacks.
 - Eat more fibre. Soluble fibre binds with cholesterol making it easier for your body to dispose of it.
 - Eat five portions of fruit and veg a day. The more colourful the better.
 - Cut down on your salt and sodium intake. Flavour your food with herbs and spices and check all labels for salt content. You shouldn’t eat more than 6g per day (that’s just one teaspoon).
 - Cut down on sugar.
- **Exercise regularly** – it needn’t be a chore. Find an aerobic activity you enjoy or join a group. It can reduce your risk of heart disease by up to 40%.
- **Stop smoking** – every cigarette can take seven minutes off your life. A smoker is three times more likely to have a heart attack. Use stitching to help you and treat yourself with the money you save.
- **Cut down on alcohol** – drinking too much damages the heart and increases blood pressure. A healthy guide is 2-3 drinks, 2-3 times per week.
- **Manage stress** – knitting and cross stitching are great tools for managing stress, which can cause high blood pressure and many other conditions.
- **Think positive** – positive thinkers have a 55% lower risk of death.
- **Laugh or sing** – It’s good for your soul!

Jargon

Cholesterol – This is a waxy type of fat made mainly in the liver from saturated fats. It's gained a bad reputation for clogging our arteries, but we wouldn't survive without it. It's essential for keeping our nervous system healthy and helps to make certain hormones. It also forms the building blocks of cell membranes and carries out many important jobs. However, too much of it is dangerous, and high levels of this fatty substance can cause narrowing or complete blockage of the blood vessels.

Atherosclerosis – This comes from the Greek words 'athero' meaning gruel or paste and 'sclerosis' meaning hardness. Some of you may know it as hardening of the arteries. It's a process where deposits of fatty substances build up on the inner lining of the artery walls. This is known as plaque and may cause considerable narrowing or even complete blockage of a vessel, severely impeding or stopping blood flow to that area. Plaque can also break off to form clots that travel to other parts of the body, leading to strokes and can be extremely dangerous.

EEG – Short for Electrocardiogram, this is a recording of the electrical activity of the heart as a graph on a moving strip of paper. It can give your doctor very important information on the health and function of your heart. The ECG machine was invented in 1902 by Dutch physiologist Willem Einthoven who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Medicine in 1924 for his invention.