

# Eating for your heart

Heart Information Series Number 5



**British Heart  
Foundation**

This is one of the booklets in the *Heart Information Series*. For a complete list of booklets, see page 31.

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  
**bhf.org.uk**

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## About this booklet

This booklet contains advice on healthy eating for people with coronary heart disease. It explains how what you eat and drink affects your heart, and looks in particular at the effects of:

- the different types of fat in foods
- fruit and vegetables
- fish and fish oils
- salt, and
- alcohol.

It also gives you some general guidelines for healthy eating.

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

## Getting ready to make changes

If you have coronary heart disease, your doctor or a nurse or dietitian may already have given you information about healthy eating and how to eat well for your heart. Perhaps you have already managed to make some changes. Maybe you have tried to make changes but have gone back to your old habits. Or perhaps much of the information in this booklet is new to you.

There are always advantages and disadvantages to making changes to what you eat. Weighing these up can help you come to a decision about what you want to do. It will be much easier to make changes once you have decided that there are good reasons for making them.

Eating a well-balanced diet can help improve your general health. If you have coronary heart disease, it brings important extra benefits too. Eating a well-balanced diet can:

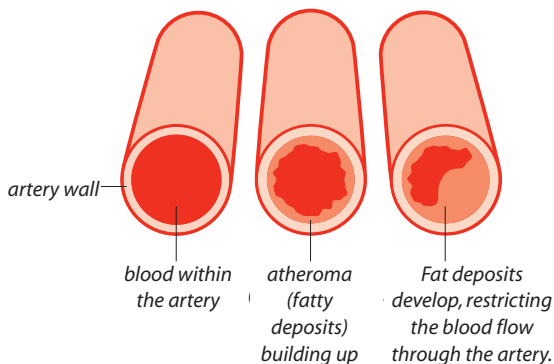
- help you to maintain or reach a healthy weight (and so reduce the strain on your heart)
- help lower your blood cholesterol level
- help keep your blood pressure down

- help prevent atheroma (fatty material) from building up in the inside walls of your arteries
- help prevent blood clots from forming, and
- increase the chances of survival if you have a heart attack.

## What is coronary heart disease?

The process of coronary heart disease begins when the coronary arteries become narrowed by a gradual build-up of fatty material within their walls. This condition is called 'atherosclerosis' and the fatty material is called 'atheroma'.

### *How atheroma builds up*



In time the artery may become so narrow that it cannot deliver enough oxygen-containing blood to the heart muscle when it needs it – such as when you are doing exercise. This can lead to a pain called angina. The pain is due to the heart muscle becoming starved of oxygen.

Coronary heart disease can become more serious if a narrowed coronary artery becomes blocked by a blood clot. This causes a heart attack.

## How what you eat and drink affects your heart

Following a healthy diet, and keeping physically active, can help reduce the risk of developing coronary heart disease, and can also increase the chances of survival after a heart attack. Here we explain how what you eat and drink affects your heart, and what you can do to help reduce your risk of coronary heart disease.

### Fruit and vegetables

- Eating at least five portions of fruit and vegetables a day will reduce the risk of coronary heart disease, probably by helping to prevent atheroma from building up within the inside walls of the coronary arteries. (See page 13.) Fruit and vegetables help to fill you up, too!



## **Fats and cholesterol**

- Reducing the total amount of fat you eat will reduce the amount of fats in your blood.
- Replacing some saturated fats with monounsaturated fats and polyunsaturated fats will help to improve the ratio of 'protective' cholesterol to 'harmful' cholesterol in your blood. (We describe the different types of cholesterol on page 15.)
- Reducing the amount of saturated fat you eat will help protect your heart even if you don't have high cholesterol.

## **Fish and fish oils**

- Eating oily fish regularly can help to reduce the risk of coronary heart disease and also helps to improve survival after a heart attack. We do not know exactly how it helps. It may be by helping to keep the heartbeat regular, reducing the level of triglycerides (fatty substances found in the blood), and preventing blood clots from forming in the coronary arteries. (See page 20.)

## **Keeping a healthy weight**

- If you are overweight, reducing your weight will reduce the workload of your heart, help keep your blood pressure down, and help lower your cholesterol levels. (See page 21.)

## Salt

- Reducing the amount of salt you eat may also help keep your blood pressure down. (See page 24.)

## Alcohol

- Too much alcohol can damage the heart muscle, increase blood pressure and also lead to weight gain. However, moderate drinking – between 1 and 2 units of alcohol a day – may help protect the heart in men aged over 40 and women who have gone through the menopause. (See page 28.)

## Eating more fruit and vegetables

There is good evidence that eating a diet that is rich in a range of vegetables and fruits lowers the risk of coronary heart disease.

It is not known exactly why fruit and vegetables have this good effect. It seems to be due to the antioxidants (vitamins and other substances) in the fruit and vegetables. Antioxidants prevent 'oxidation' – the chemical process which allows cholesterol to form atheroma within the coronary artery walls (see page 8). However, there is no evidence that taking vitamin tablets has the same effect.

Fruit and vegetables are also rich in potassium, a mineral which may help to control blood pressure and prevent irregular heart rhythms. Fruit and green vegetables are also rich in folic acid. This reduces the blood level of a substance called homocysteine, which itself may be a risk factor for coronary heart disease. However, more research is needed to find out whether having more folic acid will reduce the risk of coronary heart disease.

Aim to eat at least five portions of fruit and vegetables a day. On average, people in the UK eat

only three portions a day. Five portions may sound a lot, but in some countries people eat an average of eight or nine portions a day.

Try to eat a wide variety of fruit and vegetables. They can be fresh, frozen or tinned. Fruit juice counts, but only for one portion a day. Potatoes are a good source of starch but do not count in the 'five a day' advice.

## Aim to eat at least five portions of fruit and vegetables a day

### What counts as a 'portion'?

<b>Fruit</b>	
Apple, orange or banana	1 fruit
Very large fruit (for example, melon or pineapple)	1 large slice
Small fruits (for example, plums, kiwis, satsumas)	2 fruit
Raspberries, strawberries, grapes	1 cupful
Fresh fruit salad or stewed or canned fruit	2 to 3 tablespoonfuls
Dried fruit	$\frac{1}{2}$ to 1 tablespoonful
Fruit juice	1 glass (150mls)
<b>Vegetables</b>	
Raw, cooked, frozen or canned vegetables	2 tablespoonfuls
Salad	1 dessert bowlful

## Eating less fats and reducing your cholesterol level

Cholesterol is a fatty substance which is mainly made in the body. The liver makes it from the saturated fats in food.

The cholesterol enters the blood and is carried around by proteins. These combinations of cholesterol and proteins are called 'lipoproteins'. There are two main types of lipoproteins – low density lipoprotein (LDL) and high density lipoprotein (HDL). There is also a group of fatty substances in the blood called 'triglycerides'.

Atheroma develops when LDL cholesterol undergoes a chemical process called 'oxidation' and is taken up by cells in the coronary artery walls where the narrowing process begins. On the other hand, HDL cholesterol removes cholesterol from the circulation, and appears to protect against coronary heart disease. The goal is to have a low level of LDL and a high level of HDL.

Eating healthily can help reduce your total cholesterol level by between 5% and 10%. However, it is easier for some people to reduce their cholesterol level by eating healthily than it is

for others. On average, reducing cholesterol by 1% can lower the risk of coronary heart disease by 2%.

The cholesterol found in foods – for example in eggs, liver, kidneys, and in seafood such as prawns – does not usually make a great contribution to blood cholesterol levels. (There should be no problem in having up to four eggs a week, as long as your overall diet is healthy and well balanced.) If you need to reduce your cholesterol level, it is much more important that you eat food that is low in saturated fat. (See *Choosing healthier fats below*.)

Eating a high-fibre diet may also help to reduce the amount of cholesterol that is absorbed from your intestine into the bloodstream. For example, porridge, beans, pulses, fruit and vegetables are all high in a type of fibre which can help lower cholesterol. And a high-fibre diet helps to fill you up – making you less likely to snack on fattening foods.

### **Choosing healthier fats**

To help reduce your cholesterol level you need to do the following:

- Cut right down on saturated fats and replace them with moderate amounts of monounsaturated fats and polyunsaturated fats.

See the next page for examples of foods containing these fats.

- Reduce the *total* amount of fat you eat – especially if you are overweight. For example, you could cut down on the amount of fatty foods you eat, such as pastries, crisps or biscuits, and replace them with healthier alternatives such as fruit. Or, at mealtimes, you may be able to cut down on the amount of fatty foods you eat by filling up with starchy foods such as bread, pasta or rice instead.

To help reduce your cholesterol level, cut down on saturated fats and replace them with small amounts of monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats. Omega-3 fats are good for your heart too.

**What do they do?**

**Monounsaturated fats**

Monounsaturated fats can help lower LDL levels and do not lower the HDL cholesterol level.

**Which foods are they found in?**

Monounsaturated fats are found in:  
olive oil  
walnut oil  
rapeseed oil  
avocado.

Some margarines and spreads are made from monounsaturated fats.

Unsaturated fats		Saturated fats
<p><b>Polyunsaturated fats</b></p> <p>Polyunsaturated fats can help lower LDL cholesterol, but they also lower HDL cholesterol (the 'protective' cholesterol).</p>	<p><b>Omega-3 fats</b></p> <p>Omega-3 fats are a particular type of polyunsaturated fat. They can help prevent blood clotting, and help reduce triglyceride levels. (See page 15.)</p>	<p>Saturated fats increase LDL cholesterol levels.</p>
<p>Polyunsaturated fats are found in: cornflower oil sunflower oil soya oil fish oil.</p> <p>Some margarines and spreads are made from polyunsaturated fats.</p>	<p>Omega-3 fats are found in: fish oil oily fish such as herring, kippers, mackerel, pilchards, sardines, salmon, trout and fresh tuna.</p> <p>Our bodies can also make omega-3 fats from rapeseed oil, and from the oil in walnuts and soya.</p>	<p>Saturated fats are found in: butter hard cheese lard dripping suet ghee coconut oil palm oil.</p>

## Fish and fish oils

Eating oily fish regularly can help to reduce the risk of coronary heart disease and to improve survival after a heart attack.

The particular oil in fish that has these good effects is known as 'omega-3'. It is found mainly in oily fish such as herring, kippers, mackerel, pilchards, sardines, salmon, trout and fresh tuna. Vegetarians can get omega-3 fats from flaxseed (linseed) oil and rapeseed oil.

Aim to eat two portions of fish each week. One of these portions should be oily fish. There is some evidence to suggest that people with coronary heart disease can benefit from eating two to three portions of oily fish a week.

If you don't like oily fish, you might want to take pure fish oil capsules instead. If you already have coronary heart disease, the capsules need to provide you with between 500mg and 1,000mg of omega-3 fat a day.

## Keeping a healthy weight

By keeping close to a healthier weight for your height, you will help to keep your blood pressure down and reduce the workload of your heart. Remember that losing weight involves both eating healthily (by reducing the amount of fat in your diet, and reducing your calorie intake) and increasing your daily physical activity.

There are several different ways of working out if you are overweight. One way to get a rough idea is just by measuring your waist. See *Are you overweight?* below.

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### Are you overweight?

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Measure your waist, around the fattest part.

#### In men

37 to 40 inch waist = Overweight  
40 inches or over = Obese (very overweight)

#### In women

32 to 35 inch waist = Overweight  
35 inches or over = Obese (very overweight)

This will give you a rough idea of how overweight you are. For a more accurate assessment, see page 23.)

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Your doctor or a dietitian may take your height and weight measurements and use the chart on the next page to work out whether you are overweight or obese. He or she may also use these measurements to work out your body mass index (BMI), which combines height and weight into a single figure.

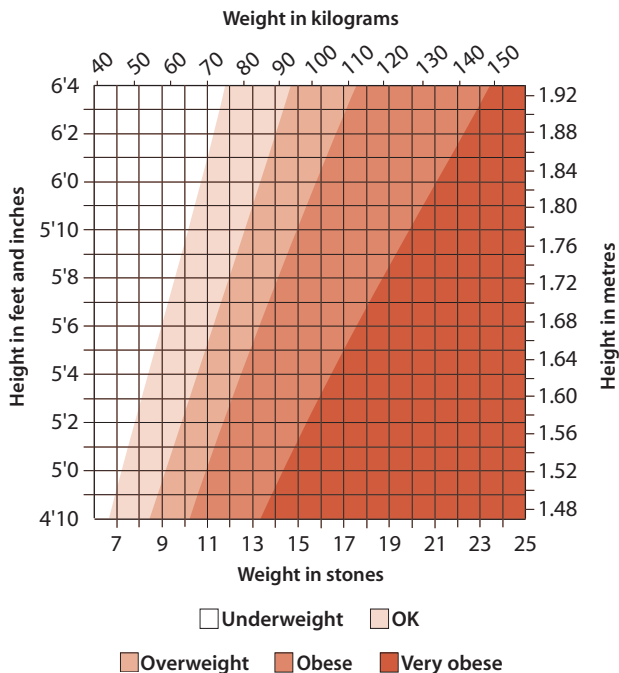
### **If you need to lose weight**

If you fall in the overweight, obese or very obese category in the chart opposite, you need to lose some weight. Don't try to lose the extra weight too quickly. Losing weight slowly and steadily (about one or two pounds a week) is more healthy, and you're more likely to keep the weight off for good. If you are very overweight, losing even 10kg (22 pounds) will benefit your health. For more information on how to lose weight, see our booklet *So you want to lose weight ... for good. A guide to losing weight for men and women.*

Being physically active plays an important part in losing weight. For more information on how to increase the amount of physical activity you do, see our booklet *Physical activity and your heart.*

## Are you a healthy weight?

Take a straight line up or down from your weight, and a line across from your height (without shoes). Put a mark where the two lines meet to find out if you need to lose weight.



Adapted from *Treat Obesity Seriously*, by J Garrow. 1981.  
By permission of Churchill Livingstone

## Cutting down on salt

People who have a lot of salt in their diet seem to be more likely to have high blood pressure. It is not yet known exactly why this happens.

It is the sodium in the salt that contributes to high blood pressure. Most people eat many times the amount of salt we need. The recommended maximum is 6 grams a day, but the body only really needs 1 gram. (One gram of salt is about one-fifth of a teaspoonful.)

To cut down on salt, first try not adding salt to your food at the table. Later on, try cooking without adding any salt. (You can add herbs and spices to add flavour instead.) You may also want to check the ingredients labels on foods, to find out how much sodium they contain. You will find that within a month your taste buds will have adjusted and you won't like salty foods! You will get all the salt you need from the 'hidden salt' in processed foods and bread.

## Hidden fats and salt

Most of the food we eat in the UK is now processed, and contains a combination of many types of foods and nutrients. So it is sometimes difficult to know exactly what you are eating. This is particularly so for fats and salt. About three-quarters of the salt we eat comes from processed foods.

- Choosing 'low salt' or 'reduced salt' foods may help.
- Try to eat as many unprocessed foods as possible.
- Many basic foods such as bread and cereals contain a lot of salt too. Look at the 'nutritional information' on the packet to find out which ones contain less salt.
- Rather than using a salt substitute, it is better to adapt your taste buds to having less salt.

## Food labels

Processed foods now have to have a list of main ingredients. Many foods also show nutritional information. However, this information is often in a form that is difficult to understand. The 'ready reckoner' *Guide to food labelling* shown on the next page may help. It shows what is 'a lot' or 'a little' in a portion of food.

## Guide to food labelling

For ready meals and foods you eat in large amounts, look at the amount per serving. For snacks, and foods you eat in small amounts, look at the 'per 100g' information. Work out from the table below whether there is a lot or a little of each nutrient in the food. Remember – the most important nutrient to look for is **fat**.

### Guide to food labelling

A lot	A little
10g of sugars	2g of sugars
20g of fat	3g of fat
5g of saturates	1g of saturates
3g of fibre	0.5g of fibre
0.5g of sodium (or 1.25g of salt)	0.1g of sodium (or 0.25g of salt)

You can get a pocket-sized *Guide to Food Labelling* from the British Heart Foundation (address on back page).

The *Daily guidelines* on the next page are a very rough guide to the recommended daily amounts of calories and nutrients for an average man or woman. You can use this information to help you make sense of food labels. For example, if a ready-made meal contains 50g of fat, you know that it has over half the recommended amount of fat for the day.

## Daily guidelines

Nutrient	Men	Women
Energy	2,500kcal	2,000kcal
Sugars	70g	50g
Fat	95g	70g
of which saturates	30g	20g
Fibre	20g	16g
Sodium (or salt)	2.5g 6g	2g 5g

## Drinking within the sensible limits



Moderate drinking – between 1 and 2 units of alcohol a day – has a protective effect on the heart in men aged over 40 and in women who have gone through the menopause. One unit of alcohol equals half a pint of ordinary beer or a small glass of wine or a pub measure of spirits.

However, heavier drinking can contribute to disorders of the heart muscle, high blood pressure and stroke.

Alcohol is high in calories too. One unit of alcohol has at least 100 kcal.

### Drinking within sensible limits

Men should drink **no more than 4 units a day**, and **a total of no more than 21 units of alcohol a week**.

Women should drink **no more than 3 units a day**, and **a total of no more than 14 units of alcohol a week**.

Don't binge drink. And have at least two alcohol-free days a week.

## For more information

### British Heart Foundation website

**bhf.org.uk**

For up-to-date information on the BHF and its services.

### Heart Information Line 08450 70 80 70

A helpline service for the public and health professionals, providing information on a wide range of issues relating to heart conditions.

### Publications and videos

The British Heart Foundation produces a range of publications and videos. You can order these through our website. The address is **bhf.org.uk**

For a complete publications list and order form, please contact:

British Heart Foundation

PO Box 138

Northampton NN3 6WB

Phone: 01604 640016

E-mail: ds-bhf@mail.dataforce.co.uk

Our publications are free of charge, but we would welcome a donation.

## Heart Information Series

This booklet is one of the booklets in the *Heart Information Series*. The other titles in the series are as follows.

- 1 Physical activity and your heart
- 2 Smoking and your heart
- 3 Reducing your blood cholesterol
- 4 Blood pressure
- 5 Eating for your heart
- 6 Angina
- 7 Heart attack and rehabilitation
- 8 Living with heart failure
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- 20 Caring for someone with a heart problem

## For more information on eating well

You can get the following booklets and video from the British Heart Foundation.

*So you want to lose weight ... for good. A guide to losing weight for men and women*

*Reducing your blood cholesterol*

*Food should be fun ... and healthy!*

*Cholesterol on the level* (video)

## **Heart health magazine**

*Heart health* is a free magazine, produced by the British Heart Foundation especially for people with heart conditions. The magazine, which comes out four times a year, includes updates on treatment, medicines and research and looks at issues related to living with heart conditions, like healthy eating and physical activity. It also features articles on topics such as travel, insurance and benefits.

To subscribe to this **free** magazine, call **01604 640 016**.

## For more information on statistics quoted in this booklet

Statement	Where you can find out more about this
<p><b>Page 15</b> Eating healthily can help reduce your total cholesterol level by between 5% and 10%.</p>	<p>From: 'Changes in risk factors explain changes in mortality from ischaemic heart disease in Finland'. By E Vartiainen, P Puska, J Pekkanen et al. Published in 1994 in the <i>British Medical Journal</i>, volume 309, pages 23-27.</p>
<p><b>Page 16</b> On average, reducing cholesterol by 1% can lower the risk of coronary heart disease by 2%.</p>	<p>From: 'By how much and how quickly does reduction in serum cholesterol concentration lower risk of ischaemic heart disease?'; by MR Law, NJ Wald and SG Thompson. Published in 1994 in the <i>British Medical Journal</i>, volume 308, page 367.</p>
<p><b>Page 20</b> Eating oily fish regularly can help to reduce the risk of coronary heart disease and to improve survival after a heart attack.</p>	<p>From: 'N-3 polyunsaturated fatty acids in coronary heart disease: A meta-analysis of randomised controlled trials'; by HC Bucher, P Hengstler, C Schindler and G Meier. Published in 2002, in the <i>American Journal of Medicine</i>, volume 112/4, pages 298-304.</p>

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**Page 22**

If you are very overweight, losing even 10kg (22 pounds) will benefit your health.

From: *Obesity in Scotland. Integrating Prevention with Management*. Published in 1996 by the Scottish Intercollegiate Guidelines Network, Edinburgh.

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## Heartstart UK

For information about a free, two-hour course in emergency life-support skills, contact Heartstart UK at the British Heart Foundation. The course teaches you to:

- recognise the warning signs of a heart attack
- help someone who is choking or bleeding
- deal with someone who is unconscious
- know what to do if someone collapses, and
- perform cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) if someone has stopped breathing and his or her heart has stopped beating.

*For your own notes:*

## About the British Heart Foundation

The British Heart Foundation (BHF) is the leading national charity fighting heart and circulatory disease – the UK's biggest killer. The BHF funds research, education and life-saving equipment and helps heart patients return to a full and active way of life.

We rely on donations to continue our vital work. If you would like to make a donation, please ring our **credit card hotline on 0870 606 3399**. Or fill in the form opposite.

**We need your help. Please send a donation today.**

**Please accept my donation of:**

£50  £25  £15  £12  Other £

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02/2004

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The British Heart Foundation (BHF) values your support. We will use the information you have given us for administration and marketing purposes. We may contact you by post or occasionally by phone or E-mail. This may include passing on news and information on our charitable work (for example how we spend our money, and heart health information), BHF events and related products and services from our subsidiary companies such as Christmas gift catalogues. Please tick the box if you do NOT want to hear from us at all.  3

Occasionally we may pass on your details to other carefully-selected organisations we are working with. They may send you information on their events, products and services.

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**Supporter Services, British Heart Foundation, 14 Fitzhardinge Street, London W1H 6DH.**

Registered Charity Number 225971

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Please tick if you would like us to send you a Gift Aid form to make your donation work harder at no extra cost to you.



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*Regular donations through a standing order give us the long-term support we need. Just tick for information on how to set up a standing order.*
- Remembering us in your Will**  
*Many people choose to leave a gift to their favourite charities in their Will. We can send you a useful information pack to tell you how to go about it.*
- Local fundraising activities and sponsored events**
- Payroll giving**  
*How you and your work colleagues can donate from your salaries before tax.*
- Buying BHF Christmas cards and gifts**
- Becoming a volunteer in a British Heart Foundation shop**

**Please send your form to the British Heart Foundation. The address is over the page.**

## Technical terms

<b>antioxidants</b>	Vitamins and other substances found mainly in vegetables and fruit.
<b>atheroma</b>	Fatty material that can build up within the walls of the arteries.
<b>atherosclerosis</b>	The build-up of fatty material within the walls of the arteries.
<b>cholesterol</b>	A fatty substance mainly made in the body.
<b>coronary heart disease</b>	When the walls of the arteries become narrowed by a gradual build-up of fatty material called atheroma.
<b>HDL</b>	High density lipoprotein. The 'protective' cholesterol.
<b>high density lipoprotein</b>	The 'protective' cholesterol. Also called HDL.
<b>LDL</b>	Low density lipoprotein. The more 'harmful' cholesterol.
<b>lipoproteins</b>	Combinations of cholesterol and proteins.
<b>low density lipoprotein</b>	The more 'harmful' cholesterol. Also called LDL.
<b>omega-3</b>	An oil found in certain types of fish.
<b>triglycerides</b>	A type of fatty substance found in the blood.

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## Your comments please

We would be very interested to hear your views about this booklet.  
Please fill in this form and send it to:

### British Heart Foundation

FREEPOST WD513

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London W1E 1JZ.

#### 1 How did you get this booklet?

I got it directly from the British Heart Foundation.

My GP or practice nurse gave it to me.

I got it from a display at my GP's surgery or health centre.

A nurse or doctor at the hospital gave it to me.

I got it from a display in a hospital.

A friend or relative gave it to me.

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#### 2 Do you find this booklet...

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helpful?

not very helpful?

not at all helpful?

#### 3 Do you find this booklet ...

very easy to understand?

easy to understand?

not very easy to understand?

#### 4 What do you think of the design of the booklet (how it looks, the size of the text, the front cover, the size)?

Very good

Good

Not very good

Poor



5 Are there any issues that you need to know about that are not covered in this booklet? If so, what are they?

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6 Do you have any other suggestions for how we could improve this booklet?

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## **Acknowledgements**

The British Heart Foundation would like to thank all the GPs, cardiologists and nurses who helped to develop the booklets in the *Heart Information Series*, and all the patients who commented on the text and design.

Particular thanks for their work on this booklet are due to:

- Lyndel Costain
- Elsa Griffiths, and
- the British Dietetic Association.

Edited by Wordworks.





*Heart health* is a free magazine produced by the British Heart Foundation especially for people with heart conditions. See page 32 for more information.

### **British Heart Foundation**

14 Fitzhardinge Street, London W1H 6DH

**Phone:** 020 7935 0185

**Website:** [bhf.org.uk](http://bhf.org.uk)

### **Heart Information Line • 08450 70 80 70**

*(A local rate number.)*

A helpline service for the public and health professionals, providing information on a wide range of issues relating to heart conditions.