

HEART MATTERS: SIMPLE STEPS TO A HEALTHIER YOU



Being diagnosed with a heart condition such as atrial fibrillation (AF) is an important opportunity to look at lifestyle changes to support the treatment plan your doctors recommend for you. A few simple changes can make a huge difference – not only to your heart health, but also to your overall fitness and wellbeing.¹

Maintain a healthy weight and follow a healthy diet

Adopting a healthy diet not only helps protect your heart but can also improve blood pressure and cholesterol levels, reducing the risk of type 2 diabetes and other diseases.

➤ **Lose weight if you need to:** Ask your doctor to help you find a plan that works for you and what support might be available.

➤ **Watch what you eat:**

Avoid or limit the following:

- ✗ Ultra-processed foods typically high in additives and low in nutritional value (e.g. fast foods and packaged snacks)
- ✗ Red and processed meats
- ✗ Refined grain products (e.g. white bread and pasta)
- ✗ Full-fat dairy products
- ✗ Foods high in saturated fats and trans fats (e.g. fried foods and baked goods)
- ✗ High-salt foods, including many ready meals and savoury snacks
- ✗ High-sugar foods such as sweet snacks and certain breakfast cereals

Instead, make healthy choices:

- ✓ Eat more fruit and vegetables – aim for at least five portions a day
- ✓ Prepare simple meals from scratch that are free from additives or high levels of salt/sugar
- ✓ Switch to:
 - Lean proteins (e.g. poultry, fish, tofu, beans, and lentils)
 - Whole grain bread, pasta and rice
 - Foods high in healthy fats, (e.g. avocados, nuts, seeds and olive oil)

➤ **Watch what you eat:**

- **Cut out or cut down on alcohol** – it's a significant risk factor for heart disease, liver disease and many types of cancer, as well as mental health issues, such as depression.² It can also be a trigger for episodes of atrial fibrillation (AF) in some patients.^{3,4}
- **Caffeine** – although caffeine is unlikely to cause AF, it may cause palpitations in some people.⁵ Discuss with your doctor whether switching to decaffeinated drinks may be appropriate for you.
- **Avoid sugary drinks and sodas and drink plenty of water** – staying hydrated has many potential health benefits, including helping with blood-pressure control.⁶

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Get Active

Incorporating regular exercise into your life can really help your heart and overall physical well-being. It can also reduce stress levels and boost your mood!

Check with your family doctor or heart specialist to determine the appropriate level of exercise for your condition.

- **Start small:** Look to get more steps and movement into your daily routines, for example by taking the stairs instead of the lift and going for a walk during your lunch break.
- **Engage in moderate-intensity exercises:** Try activities like walking, swimming, or cycling that can be sustained comfortably. Aim to reach at least 150 minutes of this type of exercise per week.⁷
- **Plan active entertainment:** Meet your friends for a walk, a bike ride, bowling or ice-skating instead of going to the cinema or a restaurant.

Stop Smoking/Vaping

This is one of the most important changes you can make for your heart. The good news is that even long-term smokers can see rapid improvements in their heart and overall health once they stop.

- **Talk to your doctor:** Ask about nicotine replacement products to help you quit and other support that might be available.
- **Avoid triggers:** Identify and stay away from situations or activities that give you the urge to light up.
- **Keep busy and stay active:** Engage in positive and physical activities to distract from cravings and improve your mood.

Manage Your Stress Levels

Unmanaged stress can quickly lead you back into unhealthy habits, so don't let it overtake you.

- **Find positive outlets:** Engage in activities that reduce stress such as walking, meditation, mindfulness, yoga, or keeping a journal.
- **Maintain social connections:** Spend time with family and friends who can support you.
- **Seek professional help:** Speak to your doctor about counseling or therapy if stress becomes overwhelming.

Understand Your Numbers

As part of your treatment plan, you will likely have regular checks on your blood pressure and blood tests to monitor your cholesterol and other important markers. Write down your test results each time and talk to your doctor about what they mean. Ask about the goals you should aim for and ways to improve.

References:

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