



**IRISH HEART
FOUNDATION**
Fighting Heart Disease & Stroke

THIS IS NOT A RED DRESS

IT'S A RED ALERT

Real women, real stories! Get informed with the facts and make a positive commitment to your heart health.



Fair City's **Martina Stanley** talks of biggest killer for women. p4



MEP, NESSA CHILDERS

Canvassing helped me lose weight! p14



HEART HEALTH

What every woman needs to know. p5



IRISH HEART FOUNDATION

Fighting Heart Disease & Stroke

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At the Irish Heart Foundation, we listen, advise, research and educate, so you can live a longer, healthier life. We are the only national charity working to prevent and reduce death and disability from heart disease and stroke in people under 65 years. Our charity is 90 per cent funded by public donations, which means we rely on the goodwill and generosity of the public and the corporate sector to make our work possible.

NATIONAL PATIENT HELPLINE • SUPPORT GROUPS • RESEARCH PROGRAMMES • PROMOTE CPR TRAINING • WEBSITE • HEALTH PROGRAMMES IN SCHOOLS, WORKPLACES AND COMMUNITIES • INFORMATION LITERATURE • ADVOCATING BETTER PATIENT SERVICES •

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Celia Holman Lee



Go Red for women is a major international awareness campaign dedicated to the prevention, diagnosis and control of heart disease and stroke in women.

Men and women not so different after all!

We all know men and women are different. But when it comes to heart disease, it affects us all.

While there is good perception that breast cancer is a real problem for women, actually stroke and heart disease are the bigger killers.

Ten years ago, we set up our Council for Heart Disease in Women to work with health professionals, patients, their families and the media and spread the word that heart disease is not just a man's disease, that women get it too.

Inside you'll read why a woman's heart has some protection until after the menopause, unless she is a smoker. After menopause our heart disease risk catches up quickly with that of men.

You will also find out more about conditions, symptoms and risk factors for heart disease in women, and you'll hear the stories from individual women about their heart health, including MEP Nessa Childers, who is taking steps to minimise her own risk by keeping to a healthy weight.

There's also plenty of motivation and tips on how to keep your heart healthy, particularly through eating well, being active, getting check-ups and not smoking.

It's never too early or too late to start.

Thanks to all members of the Irish Heart Foundation's Council on Heart Disease in Women, our celebrities and patients for their generous input and support.

Dr Kate McGarry

Chair, Council for Heart Disease in Women,
Irish Heart Foundation

"My husband had a triple bypass 10 years ago and I was there through the whole process. I've always been aware of the risk of heart disease for both men and women. I have met another woman who also had a bypass and I'm very conscious that it can happen to anyone. My husband was out cutting the grass when it happened to him and he got a pain in his left arm. He nearly didn't take notice but we made him go to the doctor. Thankfully he has been fine since then but it really brought it home to me how important it is to be healthy and to look after yourself." Celia Holman Lee, 59 years old.

A MESSAGE FROM MARTINA

"I am supporting Go Red for Women because like many other women, I didn't realise heart disease and stroke were the biggest killer of women in Ireland. I want to spread this important message that heart disease and stroke are largely preventable by having a healthy lifestyle".



Fair City actress **Martina Stanley**, 54, who plays Dolores Molloy said: "I try to eat healthily in fact I'm very nutrition conscious. I eat lots of fruit and vegetables, lean meat, fish and don't really eat junk food. But I'm a smoker, I've smoked since a young age and I've been lucky up to now because there isn't a strong history of heart disease in my family and I do try to live a healthy lifestyle the rest of the time. I love walking and getting out and about. As a result of this campaign I now realise smoking greatly increases my chances of having a heart attack or stroke, so smoking is something I have to tackle, even though it's going to be difficult."

What is heart disease?

Cardiovascular Disease (CVD) is a broad term used to describe the many diseases that can affect the cardiovascular system including diseases of the heart valves, diseases of the heart muscle and diseases of the arteries and of the veins. By far the most common type of disease in the system occurs as a result of hardening of the arteries,

'atherosclerosis', which most often leads to a heart attack – Coronary Heart Disease (CHD) – and brain attack or stroke.

As women get older their risk of cardiovascular disease increases. For many women this increased risk coincides with menopause.

RED ALERT KEY MESSAGES

Be active for at least 30 minutes five days a week.

Eat a healthy diet.

Eat more fruit, vegetables and wholegrain foods. Eat less fat, fries and convenience foods. Eat fish twice a week.

Manage your weight by being more active and eating a healthy diet.

If you smoke, try to stop. The risk of cardiovascular disease is reduced by half, one year after quitting.

Drink less alcohol - no more than 14 standard drinks per week for women.

Enjoy life. Learn to relax. Take time out for yourself and keep in touch with friends.

Have regular blood pressure and cholesterol checks with your family doctor.

Know your family history and know the signs and symptoms of heart attack and stroke.



WHAT WOMEN NEED TO KNOW

Heart Disease - signs, symptoms and risk factors
with **Dr Blaithead Murtagh**, consultant
cardiologist, Galway Clinic

Half of all women in Ireland will die of cardiovascular disease. Yet most women still view a heart attack as mainly a man's problem rather than as an issue for women too.

Only **18%** of women correctly identified heart disease as the main cause of death in females.

60% thought breast cancer was the biggest killer.

Around **5,000** women died of cardiovascular disease in Ireland in 2008.

Over the next 10 years heart disease is expected to rise in women (and men) by **50%**.

"Most women think they are going to die of breast cancer when in fact they are 7 times more likely to die of cardiovascular disease," says **Dr Blaithead Murtagh**, a cardiologist at the Galway Clinic.

Factors such as smoking, being overweight or obese, having high blood pressure, diabetes and a family history of cardiac problems, increase the risk of heart attack and stroke, and in many cases women are even more vulnerable to these factors than men, she adds.

"Women metabolise nicotine a lot faster than men, so a cigarette will increase a woman's risk a lot more than it will in a man. The same with diabetes - it increases a woman's risk of having heart disease a lot more than for a man. Another risk factor that's more important for women is the family history of heart disease which can be a stronger predictor in women than in men."

A further difficulty is that in women the symptoms of a heart attack can be vague and they might not be immediately recognised by themselves or even by a health professional.

For instance a woman may experience nausea, tiredness, shortness of breath, back pain or tightness in the jaw rather than the more familiar scenario of a crushing pain in the chest that shoots down the

arm. "It can be very hard to diagnose and that's why I think heart disease and heart attack is often missed in women," says Dr Murtagh.

After menopause (see page 20) a woman's risk of heart disease generally increases because risk factors like being overweight, having high levels of cholesterol and high blood pressure become more pronounced at this time.

But for younger women - even those who have yet to go through the menopause - smoking will put their heart more at risk, explains Dr Murtagh. "80% of women who have heart attacks under the age of 40 are smokers, and of the women who have heart attacks under 50 years old, 60% are smokers," she says.

More generally, we need to remember that cardiovascular disease does not appear overnight, and getting a baseline blood pressure and cholesterol check in your 20s or 30s as well as avoiding smoking and keeping to a healthy weight, can help keep your risk factors in check in the longer term.

"Cardiovascular disease is going to start years in advance," says Dr Murtagh. "And it's never the fancy stuff that makes you live longer, it's always about the basics: weight, blood pressure, cholesterol, being active and keeping the diabetes away."

What is a heart attack?

The heart is a muscular bag which squeezes to pump blood around our bodies. It has its own blood supply from the coronary arteries. A heart attack occurs when the heart muscle is damaged due to the blood supply being blocked off. This is caused by a build up of plaque on the inner surface of the artery. If the plaque breaks, a clot forms in the artery, which blocks the blood supply to the heart muscle.

Symptoms

Chest discomfort. Squeezing, uncomfortable pressure or pain in the centre of the chest, that lasts more than a few minutes.

Discomfort and/or pain spreading to other areas of the upper body such as the shoulders, neck or upper arms.

Shortness of breath, unexplained weakness or fatigue, anxiety or unusual nervousness, indigestion or gas-like pain, breaking out in a cold sweat, nausea, vomiting, light-headedness and collapse.

What should I do?

Not all of the above symptoms are always present. If only some are present don't wait. **Get help fast and dial 999.**

Meanwhile sit or lie down.



If you think you are experiencing a heart attack don't waste time – call 999 for an ambulance and get to a hospital immediately!

WOMEN SLOWER TO BE TREATED

Women are not treated as quickly as men for heart attacks. It's partly because women tend to delay going to hospital, and even then their symptoms may not be immediately picked up as those of a heart attack.

With Dr Sharon O'Donnell, School of Nursing and Midwifery, Trinity College Dublin.

"I found that women were much slower to come in to Accident and Emergency and when they came in it took much longer for them to be seen," says **Dr Sharon O'Donnell**, a lecturer at the school of nursing and midwifery at Trinity College Dublin.

She interviewed and collected data on almost 900 patients who came in with heart attacks to major hospitals in Dublin and found that in general the men headed straight for Accident and Emergency when they had heart attack symptoms, but that women were more likely to call to the GP first.

"Going to your GP will delay things. People should call an ambulance and go straight to Accident and Emergency," she says.

Time is important because the quicker a heart attack is recognised and treated, the better the outcome tends to be for the patient, she adds.

"Some research studies have shown that women who experience their first heart attack are more likely to die than men experiencing their first heart attack. Part of that is because women delay coming in to hospital and some health professionals may not at first recognise the signs of a heart attack in a woman," says Dr O'Donnell.

"I think everyone, the health professional and lay person alike, needs to start thinking that this is a woman's disease. When a woman comes into casualty or a GP clinic with chest discomfort, a heart attack may not be the first thing that comes into the health professional's mind. On the other hand if a man comes in with chest discomfort a heart attack is probably the first thing the health professional will consider. And that needs to be the same for women, we need to be excluding a heart attack first."

Linda's heart event

One winter morning last year, **Linda Robertson** was up early. She and her youngest child Tyler, then 18 months, were looking out at a fall of snow at 5am.



"I knew cigarettes were bad for me. But I never thought I could actually have a heart attack."

Linda went back to bed, but when she got up a couple of hours later to get ready for work in Dublin city she felt ill.

"I hadn't been well before that, I was attending the doctor so I had been getting blood tests done. But that morning when I got up again I felt a heaviness," recalls Linda.

"I thought I'd go to the doctor, but I started vomiting and sweating, so I changed my mind and called the ambulance."

Linda was taken to the Mater Hospital, assessed and brought down for an angiogram (an x-ray to show if arteries are blocked) , but on the way she had a cardiac arrest, that is her heart stopped and she needed to be treated with electric shocks.

"It was like a jerk and I was brought into the room and it happened again. It felt like I was having an out-of-body experience – I remember looking at myself and thought I was asleep, I thought I should be awake," she says.

"Then I heard the doctors calling my name. I asked one of them was

I going to die, she said no - and she was right. I was in the best place for it to happen, I'm lucky to be here."

Linda had a stent put in and within a few days she was back home again. "I was on medication and they recommended I go to cardiac rehabilitation." So she attended the programme at the Mater Hospital in Eccles Street.

Women are less likely to take part in a cardiac rehab programme, which is vital to help patients recover fully and make the necessary lifestyle changes after a cardiac event.

Linda says: "It was fantastic there. I went three afternoons and would do some exercises and we had talks on healthy eating and medication. It was very good and helpful."

Linda has a family history of heart problems – her father died of a massive heart attack. But she was surprised that as a woman she had a major cardiac event. She thought heart attacks only happened to men.

"I knew cigarettes were bad for me and I used to think I needed to give them up for the good of my health – but I never thought I could actually have a heart attack. I certainly didn't think I could have a heart attack at 44.

"It makes you appreciate now that you are here, and you try to do a bit more exercise and watch what you eat," says Linda, although she admits it's not always easy.

"It can be hard when you like all the wrong stuff. I still smoke, but I'm trying to quit. I am getting there so that's good."

What is a stent?

A stent is a metal mesh that surrounds a 'balloon' inserted into the blocked artery and when the balloon is inflated, the stent is expanded. The stent stays in the artery after the balloon is withdrawn and pushes the plaques outward, clearing the blockage in the artery. It's very important to stay on your heart medication after a stent, in particular Aspirin and Plavix. These drugs help stop the stent getting blocked with a blood clot. Usually it is advised that you stay on Aspirin permanently and on the Plavix for at least a year depending on the type of stent inserted. Make sure you get clear instructions from your doctor and never stop the medication unless you have discussed it first with your cardiologist.

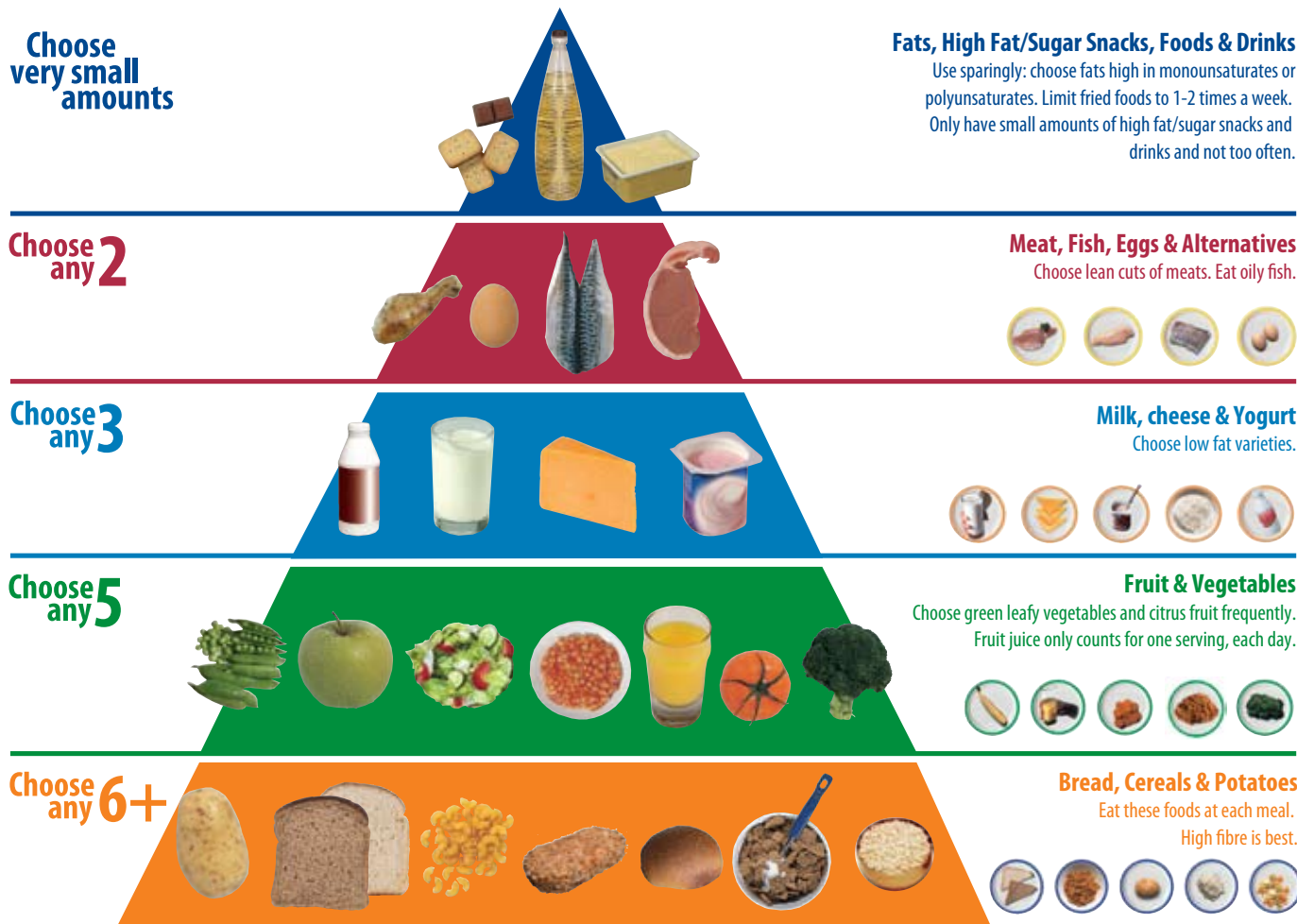
RIGHT FOOD CHOICES FOR HEART HEALTH



Choosing the right foods can make a huge difference to your heart. But do you really know what you are eating and how it could affect you? With **Janis Morrissey**, dietitian, Irish Heart Foundation.

“We know that about one third of premature deaths from cardiovascular disease are due to poor diet” says Janis. “It can make a big difference even if you have a history in the family – such as a parent or uncle who has had heart disease.”

Knowing what foods are good (or not so good) for your heart and getting into the habit of eating fresh, home-cooked meals is a great way to boost your health and that of the whole family. And it all starts with what goes into shopping trolley, so let’s go.



FATS



‘Even if you have high cholesterol, it’s important to still include three servings of low fat dairy products every day to help maintain healthy bones. Low fat versions contain just as much calcium but are better for your heart’

“We do need some fat in our diet,” says Janis. “But it’s about the amount and type.”

Every type of fat is high in calories and eating too much fat can lead to overweight and obesity, so it’s wise to pay attention to the amount you are eating. An oil spray is a handy way to keep better control when cooking.

But what are ‘good’ and ‘bad’ fats?

The ones to avoid are saturated fats and artificial trans fats, both of which raise cholesterol levels, explains Janis. Saturated fat is found mainly in animal products, but reducing it in your diet doesn’t mean everything is off the menu, it’s more about making clever choices:

“If someone has high cholesterol or is trying to look after their heart they don’t need to cut out meat or dairy products,” says Janis.

“Meat is an important source of iron and dairy products are important for calcium. We recommend the low-fat versions of dairy products, they are better for your heart and just as good for the bones as well. Choose lean cuts of meat and trim visible fat and grill, bake, boil or dry fry.”

What about eggs? They no longer deserve bad press. Janis says: “There’s a lot of research now that shows if you don’t have high cholesterol, having seven eggs a week is fine.” And just because a food contains cholesterol – like eggs, some seafood and liver – it doesn’t automatically put them on a list to avoid: it’s the saturated fat that determines the cholesterol level in your blood.

Artificial trans fats in some biscuits, ready meals and take-away foods can also raise cholesterol levels in the blood, so read the ingredients lists and avoid products containing hydrogenated or partially hydrogenated oils, because the chemical structures of those fats are not good for your heart, explains Janis.

So what about the good fats? Monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats are mainly found in vegetable oils and the beneficial omega-3 fats are mainly in oily fish. “The recommendation would be to have fish twice a week, one of which is oily, and it doesn’t have to be fresh fish all the time, it can be from a tin or can too.”

SALT



Just like we need some fat in our diet to keep our bodies healthy, we need a small amount of salt too, but many adults in Ireland take in far too much, explains Janis.

“Our bodies only need about 4 grams (less than a teaspoon) per day but we consume around 9 grams a day (almost two teaspoons) - way over what our bodies need.”

Too much salt in the diet can increase blood pressure to unhealthy levels, which is a major risk factor for stroke and heart disease. So it’s important to add salt sparingly when cooking and replace it instead with tasty flavourings like pepper, lemon and herbs.

“But 75 per cent of the salt in our diets comes from processed and restaurant foods where you have less control,” says Janis, so you should aim to eat more home-cooked fresh food where you know what’s going into it.

Food labels can be confusing, but a rule of thumb is that anything with over 1.5g of salt per 100g is on the high side. And if a label lists the ‘sodium’, you need to multiply that figure by 2.5 to get the real salt levels (so 1g of sodium is the equivalent to 2.5g of salt).

Janis notes that it can take around six weeks for your palette to adjust to a lower-salt diet, but the health benefits are worth it.

FRUIT & VEG



A healthy diet contains a wide variety of fruit and vegetables – at least five servings per day.

The fibre, vitamins and other nutrients contribute to overall health and can fill you up so you eat less unhealthy foods. Try to include a range of different colours of fruit and vegetables in your diet throughout the day – chop fruit on your breakfast cereal, include a salad with tomatoes and peppers with lunch, have steamed greens with dinner and snack on raw vegetables and fruit.

PORTIONS

Keep an eye on food portion sizes and follow the food pyramid recommendations

“Apart from looking at the types of food, people need to look at the portion size, especially for a healthy weight. It’s about quantity as well as quality,” says Janis. She suggests keeping a simple food diary for a day, jotting down what, when and roughly how much you eat as you go along.

It can help you get a sense of whether your diet falls into line with the Food Pyramid and recommended servings of different food types, and it might highlight some habits you weren’t even aware of.

Janis asks: “Are you grazing – picking away at food while watching the telly or in the car?”

Sometimes when we are grazing, we do not realise how much we are eating,” she concludes.



SUGARS & STARCHES



“Often foods claiming to be low in fat are high in sugar and they are on the top shelf of the Food Pyramid so eating too much of them can displace healthier foods that are good for the heart,” says Janis.

She also recommends that when you are eating starchy foods like bread, pasta, rice or breakfast cereal, to go for the high-fibre and less processed option.

TIPS

Choose fresh produce wherever possible and read food labels on packaged and processed foods. Keep an eye out for levels of salt and saturated fats and avoid foods that contain hydrogenated fats

Cook at home when you can, and use herbs and pepper to flavour foods rather than salt

Eat two portions of **fish** per week, one of which is oily

Cook with a little olive or vegetable oils rather than butter, lard, margarine or shortening. And use an oil spray to control the amount for frying

Choose low-fat dairy products and aim for three servings per day

Trim visible fat from cuts of meat and dry-fry mince then pour off the fat before adding other ingredients

Boost your vegetable intake with crispy salads and snacks of carrot sticks and cherry tomatoes.

Drink water regularly – at least eight cups of fluid a day.

See www.irisheart.ie for lots of heart healthy recipes.



NEVER TOO LATE TO STOP!

SMOKING IS ONE OF THE MAJOR CAUSES OF HEART DISEASE AND STROKE. WOMEN WHO SMOKE ARE ALMOST TWICE AS LIKELY TO HAVE A HEART ATTACK AS WOMEN WHO HAVE NEVER SMOKED.

Women who smoke and take the contraceptive pill further increase their risk of heart attacks and strokes. Smoking while pregnant increases your chance of a miscarriage and reduces your chances of getting pregnant.

Tobacco contains over 4,000 chemicals including more than 60 that are known to cause cancer. Many are poisonous such as carbon monoxide, cyanide, arsenic, polonium and acetone. It's never too late to stop smoking. The benefits happen immediately:

- **20 minutes** after you stop smoking a cigarette, your blood pressure and pulse return to normal.
- **One day later** carbon monoxide has been eliminated from your body and your lungs begin to clear of mucous and other smoking debris
- **By day two** there will be no nicotine in your body, taste and smell improves
- **Three days after** stopping for good, breathing is easier and energy levels increase
- **Within days** your blood is less likely to clot
- **Over the next three months** your circulation improves and the risk of heart attack and stroke reduces
- **Within five years** your risk of heart attack falls to half that of a smoker.
- **Within 10 years**, you will have about the same risk of heart disease as someone who has never smoked.
- **There are many more benefits** including increased energy and you will feel free from the worry that you are damaging your health, as well as that of your family and friends.

STAY POSITIVE, KEEP BUSY, BE ACTIVE. SAVE YOUR MONEY AND REWARD YOURSELF (SMOKING 20 A DAY COSTS OVER 3,000 EURO A YEAR).



National Smokers' Quitline

1850 201 203

There is support available to help you stop.

Stopping smoking is the single most important thing you can do to live longer and it's never too late to stop.

THERE IS SUPPORT AVAILABLE TO HELP YOU TO STOP SMOKING.

The National Smokers' Quitline offers advice and support to help you stop smoking. Phone **1850 201 203**.

The Irish Heart Foundation **Heart & Stroke Helpline**. Phone **1890 432 787**.

Your **GP** will have advice and literature on the benefits of stopping smoking and may prescribe medication such as Zyban or Champix.

Your local **HSE Health Promotion Team** employs **Smoking Cessation Officers** who organise stop smoking clinics and advice to community groups.

Your local pharmacy or doctor can offer advice and support on nicotine replacement therapy (NRT) which is available in the form of gum, patches, inhalers and tablets.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON STOPPING SMOKING SEE OUR IRISH HEART FOUNDATION LEAFLET 'STOPPING SMOKING FOR A HEALTHY AND HAPPY HEART'



Trish Gavigan, stroke survivor, with her daughter

The good news is that by following a healthy lifestyle and keeping your arteries in good shape you can reduce your risk of both stroke and heart attack.

The steps you can take to help keep your arteries clean, include maintaining a healthy weight, controlling blood pressure, being regularly active and being a non-smoker. And risk factors add up says Dr Brown: "The risk factors are cumulative, so if you smoke and have high blood pressure it increases your risk, and if you have diabetes it further increases your risk significantly."

FAST action reduces damage from stroke

Women need to pay attention to risk factors and symptoms and realise stroke can affect them too.

Did you know that a stroke is like a heart attack in the brain? And that tackling risk factors like high blood pressure, diabetes, physical inactivity and smoking works to reduce your risk of both heart attack and stroke? With Dr Angie Brown, Consultant Cardiologist and Medical Director, Irish Heart Foundation.

Either a stroke or a heart attack can happen as a result of cardiovascular disease, which in turn is linked to wear and tear of the arteries that carry blood around your body.

A stroke happens when a blood vessel in the brain bleeds or blood flow through part of the brain is stopped by a narrowing or complete blockage of the artery by a clot, which cuts off oxygen to brain tissue. The most common underlying cause of a stroke is 'atherosclerosis' or a furring of the arteries. This damage can build up over time, so strokes tend to be more common in older women, explains Dr Brown.

But no matter when or where a stroke happens, the person needs to get to hospital immediately. On average a stroke destroys roughly two million brain cells every minute, so delays in getting treated can make the situation worse.

"It's very important for people to recognise the signs and get seen to rapidly," says consultant cardiologist Dr Angie Brown, medical director of the Irish Heart Foundation.

"Some patients will do well from a treatment called thrombolysis, which helps to break up a clot that's blocking a blood vessel, but that has to be given within a few hours to be effective. And all patients need to be assessed quickly so they can receive the best treatment and follow-up," adds Dr Brown.

Dr Brown says: "Women tend to be busy and are less likely to ask their doctor to have their blood pressure checked. Awareness is changing but still not rapidly enough – women still think that a heart attack or stroke is something that will happen to the men in their life, so if they have a little bit of tingling or numbness that only lasts for a minute or two they would ignore it."

Some strokes are minor – called mini-strokes or TIAs – but no matter how mild or severe, stroke symptoms should never be brushed aside and anyone having them needs medical treatment immediately.

"A severe stroke is easy to tell because suddenly the person can't move one side of their body or speak properly," says Dr Brown. "With a minor stroke or TIA, a person can have just a little bit of numbness in the fingers and hand or face, they may drop something, have a little bit of weakness or become confused and start talking nonsense. Sometimes patients find it quite hard to describe what's going on. But TIAs may be a warning sign of a full blown stroke and you need to be seen immediately. This is an acute medical emergency and you need to call and ambulance or get someone to drive you there."

What is a stroke?

A stroke is a brain attack.

A stroke occurs when a blood vessel, which is carrying oxygen and nutrients to the brain, bursts or is blocked by a clot. This causes an interruption of the blood supply to part of the brain. This can damage or destroy brain cells which will affect body functions.

For example, if a stroke damages the part of the brain that controls limb movement, a person's ability to move an arm or leg may be affected. A stroke can also affect mental processes such as how people feel, think, communicate, or learn.

The term 'stroke' comes from the fact that it usually happens without warning, 'striking' the person from out of the blue. The effects of a stroke on the body are immediate.

A stroke on the right side of the brain generally causes problems on the left side of the body, while a stroke on the left side of the brain causes problems on the right side of the body.

And some strokes affect the base of the brain and can cause problems with eating, breathing and moving.

See www.stroke.ie

Know the signs of stroke and act FAST

A recent survey of over-65s by the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland found that fewer than half of respondents knew the symptoms of a stroke, which happen suddenly and can include:

> numbness or weakness
(especially on one side)

> severe headache

> vision disturbance

> confusion

But knowing the red flags could pay off: getting medical help quickly could save a life and reduce damage to the brain.

Here is a simple test that can help you recognise if someone has had a **stroke** and **act FAST...**

FACE



Ask the person to smile.
Does one side droop?

ARMS



Ask the person to raise both arms and keep them there.
Does one drag?

SPEECH



Can the person repeat a sentence? Is there slurring?

TIME



If you see any of the above signs – even just one – call an ambulance now.

National Stroke & Heart Helpline Local

1890 432 787

The Irish Heart Foundation Helpline is funded by public donations.
Open Monday to Friday, from 10am to 5pm.

Canvassing helped me lose weight!

The lifestyle of a busy politician could easily lead **Nessa Childers astray from the path of good health. But having a family history of heart disease has spurred Labour MEP for Ireland East to keep in good shape.**

FAMILY HISTORY

"My family history was nothing short of disastrous," says 54-year old Nessa, chatting in a taxi as she returns to her Dublin home from Brussels.

She was with her father, former President of Ireland Erskine H. Childers, when he passed away from a heart attack, and one of her brothers also died of heart disease.

"I knew about those family risks, and I also knew about the risks increasing for women when they pass menopause," she says.

WEIGHT GAIN

The crunch finally came when Nessa – who had been sporty in her 20s – put on weight as a young mother and it was starting to affect her joints. "I began to notice that one of my knees was hurting all the time and at that point I thought this is it, this is where I have to now take action."

Her key to success was taking regular exercise – something that happened naturally when she began to canvass for the Labour Party in the run up to an election.

"I was going door to door, and I noticed the weight started falling off me accidentally. So I made an effort to walk further and faster," says Nessa. "I was never on an official diet, but I also started being careful about what I ate."

Nessa also made other lifestyle changes to help minimise the risk her genes had dealt. "I stopped smoking when I was 33 because my father smoked a pipe and I think it was an extra risk factor," she recalls.

She also tries to avoid reaching for foods that give a quick hit to keep her going through a busy schedule that involves plenty of travel.

"There is a tendency for people to hit the sugary snacks because they create certain changes in the bloodstream. But you just have to say no to yourself sometimes," she says. "And you have to be careful in airports as you can get very unhealthy food."

Today exercise is a central part of Nessa's healthy lifestyle, and she makes sure she carves out time to work out in Brussels.

LIFELONG CHANGES & DISCIPLINE

"I get up at 6.30 in the morning to walk around the parks or I go to the gym before I go to work," she says. "I get back at eight and have a bit of breakfast, which is really important, and then I go to work where the food is very healthy in the European Parliament."

Nessa believes it's important for parents to get the whole family into the habit of healthy eating and exercise and she has been working to make health messages on food labels more obvious to consumers.

And in the meantime, she's leading by example. "It requires a lifetime change, discipline and constant vigilance on my part. The price of not being vigilant is too high."

ACTIVE FOR A HAPPY HEART

Did you know that not being active carries a similar health risk to that of smoking, high blood pressure and high cholesterol?

A hearty pace...

- **Causes your heart to beat a little faster.**
- **Makes you breathe deeper and faster but not so that you are out of breath.**
- **Makes you will feel warmer all over.**



Regular physical activity brings so many benefits for your heart and your health as well as a sense of wellbeing. It can reduce your risk of getting heart disease and stroke by keeping your blood vessels healthy and lowering blood pressure and cholesterol.

THE GOOD NEWS...

- It only takes a minimum of 30 minutes of physical activity 5 days a week to enjoy these benefits.
- Physical activity can vary from leisure activities such as walking or dancing to more routine physical tasks such as cleaning the house or gardening.
- Activities can be spread over 1, 2 or 3 shorter sessions i.e. 2 x 10 minutes walking and 1 x 20 minutes of gardening. Each session must be at least 10 minutes to make it count.
- For more health benefits increase your activity to 60 minutes of moderate activity 5 days a week.
- If you enjoy more vigorous activity you can reduce the frequency to 20 minutes on 3 days a week or combine it with moderate activity e.g. 2 days x 30 minutes' walking at a hearty pace and 2 days x 20 minutes' jogging.
- To lose weight aim to be active for at least 60 -75 minutes five days a week, and again this can be spread over the day and the effort required is moderate or hearty pace.
- To get even fitter increase the intensity of your activity so that it is more vigorous and makes you huff and puff more.

ACTIVE
FOR A HAPPY HEART



SAFELY ON THE MOVE HOW TO GET MORE ACTIVE

GETTING STARTED

Talk to your doctor before starting a new physical activity or routine, especially if you have a heart or lung condition, had a stroke, have already been diagnosed with high blood pressure or are overweight.

CHOOSE WELL

Choose an activity or a variety of activities that you enjoy – you are far more likely to stick to it.

KNOW YOUR OPTIONS

Aerobic activity, such as walking, gardening or swimming, works the heart and lungs and is the best type of activity for your heart. Consider brisk walking, swimming, dancing or an exercise class with a qualified leader. A good class will include activities to improve your aerobic fitness, as well as flexibility, strength and balance co-ordination, which are also important.

TO LOSE WEIGHT

Build up to 60 to 75 minutes of activity at a moderate intensity (or hearty pace) five days of the week. Even when you have lost weight, aim to be active for this amount to help you maintain weight loss.

LISTEN TO YOUR BODY

Never push your body too hard, especially if you have high blood pressure, are getting older or have a heart condition. You will know if the activity is suitable and not too demanding if you are still able to carry on a conversation during the activity.

STOP IMMEDIATELY if you feel unwell or in pain. Consult your doctor if your symptoms remain or return.

HOW OFTEN HOW MUCH HOW LONG?

FROM COUCH POTATO...

Start with two short (5-10 minutes) bouts of easy activity per week. Don't push yourself.

TO MODEST MOVER

Increase your activity to three to four 10-15 minutes of physical activity at a moderate or hearty pace.

TO HEARTY HUMAN

Aim to be active for 30 minutes or more five days a week. You can break this into several short bouts (e.g. 20 minutes' walking; 15 minutes' gardening; 10 minutes' stretching).



30 MINUTES FIVE DAYS A WEEK...

Strengthens your heart and circulation and protects you from heart disease and stroke and helps recovery after a heart attack

Uses about 200 calories a day and helps manage your weight

Strengthens your bones and muscles and helps prevent osteoporosis and falls

Improves body functions and helps to prevent some types of cancers and diabetes

Triggers 'happy hormones' and makes you feel good, relaxed and reduces stress

REDUCE THE STRESS...

Relaxation slows breathing and pulse rates, releases muscle tension and produces a sense of well-being. Research shows that relaxation training bolsters the body's immune system and its ability to heal injuries and fight illness, including heart disease.

HELP YOURSELF TO RELAX BY TRYING THE FOLLOWING:

- Deep breathing exercises and muscle relaxation, maintaining deep slow breathing
- Visualise images or memories (such as holiday memories) that evoke serenity, happiness or joy
- Explore some complementary therapies such as massage, yoga and reflexology which slow down the heart and relax the body
- Keep a stress journal to help you identify stressful situations and your response
- Get adequate sleep
- Be active more often. Find something you enjoy and ideally do it with a friend
- Try new hobbies, sports or social activities you enjoy
- Develop friendships and confide in those you trust
- Become part of your local community, through social activities, voluntary work or joining in on physical activity events.



ACHIEVE A HEALTHY WEIGHT WOMEN SHARE THEIR SUCCESS



LAURA

"Be positive! I've learned that the only way to lose weight and keep it off is by changing your eating habits and being physically active."

MARY

"Set realistic goals! It took me five years to put on my extra weight but I wanted to lose it in a few weeks! Aim for 1-2lb each week – that's 1-2 stone in 14 weeks."

JANE:

"I found it really helpful to write down what I ate at each meal and for snacks and drinks. It got me focused and I felt I was in control. Adding up how much activity I had each day also helped."

EIMEAR

"I've tried lots of fad diets and expensive diets but I always put the weight back on. Eventually I found that using the Food Pyramid as a guide and being careful on portion sizes, as well as being active, was the solution".

CHRISTINE

"Adding fruit and vegetables to all my meals and snacks really helped me feel satisfied and never hungry".

KATE

"I really watched my fat intake. I used very little fat or oil in cooking and chose lean meat, chicken and fish and low fat choices in spreads, milks and yoghurts. I wasn't fooled by low-fat high-sugar bars and biscuits, they are still high in calories."

YVONNE

"Healthy eating and getting more active really worked for me. I skipped an hour TV every evening and had a brisk walk instead. It's now my time out for myself and I often walk more than 60 minutes for the sheer enjoyment. I've really firmed up and reached a healthy weight."

LIZ

"I've learned not to use food as a reward or as a way of coping with stress. Now I reward myself with flowers, a walk, swim or a magazine instead."

The Irish Heart Foundation Heart & Stroke Helpline

1890 432 787

DIABETES GREATLY INCREASES RISK OF HEART DISEASE IN WOMEN



Dr Mary Ryan, consultant physician and endocrinologist at Barrington's Hospital, Limerick.

When it comes to the heart, women with diabetes have an even higher risk than men.

Did you know that having Type 2 Diabetes pushes up your risk of having a heart attack? Yet because diabetes develops slowly it may be several years before a person is diagnosed with it – even though it can be silently damaging the body.

The good news though is that by taking steps to protect yourself against heart disease such as regular physical activity, healthy eating, keeping to a healthy weight and not smoking, you will also reduce your risk of developing diabetes. More importantly these steps will help you to manage the condition if it has already developed.

In Type 2 Diabetes the body becomes insensitive to the hormone insulin, which normally helps to regulate the amount of sugar circulating in your blood. If insulin isn't doing its job properly, blood sugar levels can remain high and over time cause damage to blood vessels and many of the tissues they supply, like the kidneys, eyes and limbs.

"Type 2 Diabetes is one of the major public health concerns today," says Dr Mary Ryan.

"People with diabetes are two-to-four times more likely to die than those of the same age who do not have diabetes, and approximately 75 to 80 per cent will die due to cardiovascular disease."

Already around 400,000 people in Ireland have Type 2 Diabetes – although it is estimated that around half of them have not yet been diagnosed.

When it comes to the heart, women with diabetes have an even higher risk than men.

Dr Ryan says: "Women with diabetes have a four-to-six fold increase in the risk of developing heart disease; whereas men with diabetes have a two-to-three fold increase in risk. Diabetes is on the increase and 75 per cent of patients with Type 2 diabetes will die of a heart attack."

Women who had diabetes during pregnancy need to be particularly careful, as it can be a 'red flag' for developing diabetes and heart disease in later life, according to Dr Ryan.

Being very overweight or obese increases the risk of developing Type 2 Diabetes and obesity is linked with an upward trend of diabetes around the world. But losing excess weight reduces the risk of dying from cardiovascular disease and diabetes, and including regular physical activity into your lifestyle can help.

Menopause, heart disease and stroke.

Dr Barbara O'Beirne, GP and President Irish Menopause Society. Menopause is a normal event which occurs when your ovaries stop producing eggs and your periods stop for over a year (in the absence of other causes). As a result your ovaries no longer produce the hormones, oestrogen and progesterone. All women go through the menopause - the average age is 52 years. A women whose periods stop before aged 45 years is considered to have a premature menopause.

The main effects of the menopause are:

Both women and doctors alike differ on how to view the menopause - some regard it as a natural phase and therefore not requiring treatment, others see it as a time associated with important health effects due mainly to lack of oestrogen.

Regardless of opinion, some women experience no problems and others go through a difficult time. It has long been accepted that oestrogen in pre-menopausal women provides protection against heart disease and stroke. After menopause risk of osteoporosis increases and there can also be changes in energy, memory, urinary and sexual health. Changes in lifestyle such as diet and stopping smoking can make a real difference to the way you feel and can have great health benefits.

1 There is an effect on blood fats especially increased Low Density Lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol and this is likely to raise overall cholesterol levels in the blood.

2 Blood pressure increases after the menopause. This increase is often undetected by women, especially if up to menopause they had a normal blood pressure level and then even if picked up it is often poorly managed.

3 There is a change in blood flow in the arteries, a factor among others, which causes the arteries to harden and thereby increases the risk of heart disease and stroke. This has been found to be linked to the severity of hot flushes.

4 Increased body fat and a distribution of fat in the middle as opposed to the hips (which is associated with increased risk of cardiovascular disease even in normal weight women).

Metabolic changes increase as women progress into menopause causing a range of problems that influence risk of heart disease and stroke, including those mentioned above - increased blood pressure, increased cholesterol levels and increased weight.

5 Increased Insulin Resistance which means that the hormone insulin used by the body to break down sugar does not work properly and this increases risk of diabetes and in turn increases risk of heart attack and stroke.



Women's concern and fear about cancer, especially breast cancer mean that they are less likely to think of their risk of heart disease and stroke.

Go Red for Women is about changing this perception and encouraging women to take action now for their heart health.

Increased age also has a negative effect on many symptoms leading to increase in diabetes, weight and blood clotting - all leading to a steep increase of risk for heart disease as time goes by. It is very important to have regular check ups at this stage of your life to assess your personal profile, so that you can take positive steps to maintaining good heart health such as:

- **Blood Pressure**
- **Glucose (sugar) level**
- **Cholesterol check to assess levels of cholesterol and other fats in the blood**
- **Kidney function**
- **Thyroid function**
- **Weight and waist measurement**



CHOLESTEROL CHECK

Cholesterol is a soft, fatty or waxy substance which the body needs to produce some hormones and to help digestion. However, as saturated (hard) fats convert to cholesterol in the body, taking in too many fatty foods results in fatty deposits which clog and narrow the arteries leading to heart problems. There can also be a family history of high cholesterol.

Cholesterol levels are measured by analysing a blood sample. Depending on the results and your other risk factors, a change in diet, more regular physical activity or prescribed medication may be suggested.

FOR HEALTHY CHOLESTEROL:

- **Follow the Food Pyramid guidelines**
- **Eat less fatty foods and switch to low fat dairy products**
- **Choose 5 servings of fruit and vegetables a day**
- **Choose fish twice a week, one of which is oily**
- **Include peas, beans and lentils regularly**
- **Keep an eye on portion sizes**
- **Be physically active**

Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) – does it increase risk of heart problems?

Concerns have been raised about HRT and the potential risks to various aspects of health. However, recent studies have shown that although not entirely free of risk, it is the 'gold standard' for treating hot flushes and can also be effective in preventing osteoporosis. It may in certain post menopausal women provide protection against heart disease and stroke. This is particularly the case for women with premature menopause (under age 45 years) because these women have a higher risk of developing cardiovascular disease.

Studies of women who have had their ovaries removed surgically suggest that they are 2-3 times more likely to have a heart attack than women of the same age who still have their ovaries and are pre-menopausal.

The timing of starting HRT is very important. If women start HRT in early menopause (50-59 years) the risk of side effects is very small. HRT is not usually recommended for women over 60 years when the risks are increased.

Any decision on HRT is made on an individual basis, depending on your own health and in consultation with your general practitioner.

A HELPING HAND AFTER HEART ATTACK

CARDIAC REHAB CAN OFFER A HELPING HAND TO GET BACK INTO THE SWING OF LIFE AFTER A HEART ATTACK OR A CARDIAC PROCEDURE.



The educational talks, exercise programmes and health assessments on offer can be an invaluable resource for people who have already had a heart-related event and want to reduce their chance of another, explains Sophie Charles, a cardiology nurse and cardiac rehab co-ordinator at Loughlinstown Hospital in Co. Dublin.

“It’s to cater for people after they have had the event, to restore their confidence and get their risk factors into line,” she says. “They have been sick and had the surgery, but really if they don’t look after their arteries they are going to be in trouble again.”

Cardiac rehab staff are available to reassure and talk to patients while they are still in hospital recovering from the event or procedure, then after people have returned home they are invited to come to informative talks about important subjects such as nutrition, medications and stress management.

Once they are well enough, people can also come in for a structured eight-week exercise programme to help build themselves back up, explains Sophie. “The exercise increases their confidence and mobility but also their blood flow and helps them feel well. We check their blood pressure and cholesterol too to make sure they are at target level and their medication is doing the trick.”

Unfortunately the programme is not taken up by everyone, according to Sophie. “There are numerous reasons why people don’t take it – perhaps they have gone back to work or they don’t like groups. Women sometimes pass up the chance of cardiac rehab specifically because of family commitments,” she adds. “Older women might be tied to grandchildren. But you try and hopefully persuade them about the benefit of taking eight weeks out and getting back on track.”

Cardiac rehab can also help soothe anxiety, which can be an issue particularly for women who are recovering from an event or procedure, and the team may be able to offer one-to-one help if appropriate.

It’s important to take up the offer of cardiac rehab in order to reap the rewards of the programme and regain heart health, notes Sophie. “We have had 1,500 people through the doors here in Loughlinstown, and they have ranged in age from 21 to 91,” she says. “And once they get here they enjoy the benefit.”

MANAGE YOUR BLOOD PRESSURE

Measuring your blood pressure is simple, painless and gives instant results. Ask your GP to measure your blood pressure and what reading it is. High blood pressure can put a strain on the heart and arteries and lead to an increased risk of heart attack and stroke. It may need to be managed with medication and some lifestyle changes.

FOR HEALTHY BLOOD PRESSURE

- **Try not to become overweight**
- **Eat more fruit and vegetables and less salt**
- **Go easy on alcohol**
- **Be physically active**
- **Take time to relax, share your worries, listen to music, walk off your tensions**
- **If you smoke, stop**



The **Irish Heart Foundation** is Ireland's only charity dedicated to the reduction of death and disability from heart disease and stroke. Over 90 per cent of our income comes from public and corporate donations. We depend on your **goodwill and generosity** to continue our work.

PLEASE SEND TO:

The Irish Heart Foundation,
4 Clyde Road, Ballsbridge,
Dublin 4

Or if you would rather give your details by phone, you can call us on **01 668 5001**

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