



LOOKING AFTER YOUR HEART

Looking After Your Heart

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Heart disease is one of the leading causes of death in Ireland. Around 1 in 3 men and women die from heart disease. This may sound scary, but the great thing is that there is actually a lot you can do to reduce your chances of developing heart disease. People with coeliac disease may be at a higher risk of heart disease as they are more likely to have higher levels of cholesterol. This may be due to changes in diet, but scientists think that it might be part of coeliac disease itself.

So what can you do to look after your heart?

The two big areas to focus on are cholesterol and blood pressure. Although these can run in families, there is still plenty of ways that you can help keep yours under control.

Managing cholesterol

Cholesterol is a type of fat found in your blood. It is actually important for good health helping to make important hormones and other substances in your body. Cholesterol only becomes a problem when there is too much of it. If cholesterol gets too high, it can start to settle out of the blood and line the arteries. Over time, the build-up of cholesterol can lead to arteries that are too narrow to allow blood to move through. The build up of cholesterol can also trigger the body into making a blood clot at the blockage. If this happens in your heart, it is a heart attack. If it happens in your brain, it is called a stroke.

Getting tested

Do get tested. If you have never had a cholesterol test, now is the time. Your GP can check your cholesterol and you will be given a set of results: Your total cholesterol; your LDL (or “bad”) cholesterol”; and your HDL (or “good”) cholesterol.

Total Cholesterol	Should be less than 5.0	Total Cholesterol is LDL and HDL cholesterol (plus some other types of cholesterol) added together
LDL Cholesterol	Should be less than 3.0	This type of cholesterol is often called ‘bad’ cholesterol as it is the type that can build up in your arteries.
HDL Cholesterol	Should be more than 1.0-1.5	HDL is called ‘good’ cholesterol as it helps to remove LDL cholesterol from your blood.

Remember: there is no such thing as “slightly high” cholesterol – it is either high or it isn’t. Don’t wait until it is higher before you do anything about it!

How to lower cholesterol

1. Eat oats. Gluten free, of course. Oats have a special type of fibre called beta-glucan which helps to lower cholesterol. So, eating oats can really help get your cholesterol to healthy levels. Don't worry if you are sensitive to oats as well – there are lots of other ways to lower cholesterol!
2. Eat more beans and lentils. The fibre in beans and lentils can also help to lower cholesterol. Look for gluten free baked beans, chickpeas, kidney beans and lentils. Try soups made with beans and lentils, adding a handful of lentils to dishes like Bolognese and shepherd's pie; try some vegetarian meals based on beans or lentils or check out some recipes for bean salads.
3. Nuts and seeds that are high in the omega-3 ALA can also help to lower cholesterol. Try linseeds or flaxseeds along with walnuts, almonds and hazelnuts. Add them to breakfast cereals, yoghurt, over salads or just enjoy a handful as a snack.
4. Limit saturated fat. Saturated fat is a type of fat that is made into cholesterol when it gets to your liver. Reducing the amount of saturated fat you eat can make a big difference to cholesterol levels. You don't need to ban foods that are high in saturated fat – but if you are eating them everyday it is a good idea to start cutting back.
 - a. Limit processed meats like sausages, black and white pudding, salami, chorizo etc.
 - b. Switch to a low fat spread or choose one made from olive oil or sunflower oil instead.
 - c. Avoid adding cream to meals and desserts – unless it is a very special occasion!
 - d. Trim the fat off meat especially home-cooked ham, steak etc.
 - e. Use olive oil, rapeseed oil or sunflower oil instead of butter or coconut oil for cooking.
 - f. Limit biscuits, pastries, cakes and muffins – even gluten free ones are made with lots of saturated fat.

Looking after your blood pressure

High blood pressure can damage the lining of your arteries and make it more likely that cholesterol will stick. Even slightly high blood pressure can be a problem so it is important to do what you can to help to lower it.

Do get checked – over half of adults aged over 45 in Ireland have high blood pressure! High blood pressure can lead to heart disease, stroke, kidney failure and poor circulation in your legs. Lots of reasons to keep this under control!

The normal level of blood pressure is usually about 120 (systolic) over 80 (diastolic). If your blood pressure is 140 over 90 or higher (or 140 over 80 if you have diabetes) then you have high blood pressure.

How to lower blood pressure:

1. Move. Any kind of physical activity is amazing for helping to lower blood pressure. As little as walking for 20 minutes five days a week can make a difference. Aim to get out for a walk (or a swim or a cycle or anything, really) at least 5 days a week. Aim to get at least 20 minutes but feel free to do more! If you have not been active for a while, start small and

build up. Even 5 minutes a day will start to help. Exercise and movement are the most important ways to lower blood pressure so do what you can to get active.

2. Eat lots of fruit and vegetables. We hear a lot about salt raising blood pressure but did you know that potassium will help to lower it? Fruit and vegetables are all really good sources of potassium. People who eat lots of fruit and vegetables have lower blood pressure than people who avoid them. Try to have some fruit and/or vegetables at every meal. In an ideal world, up to half of your plate should be fruit, vegetables or salad at every meal. This can be fruit with your breakfast in the morning, a nice bowl of vegetable soup at lunch time and a side salad or stir fry at dinner. Do check out the recipes on our website for lots of vegetable dishes and ideas.
3. Eat low fat dairy. Proteins found in milk and yoghurt have been shown to help lower blood pressure. Sadly this is not true for cream and butter... Choose low fat yoghurt and milk and aim to have 3-4 servings per day. If you are lactose intolerant, try lactose free milk instead.
4. Reduce salt. You don't need to ban salt but you do need to limit very salty foods like crisps, salted peanuts, salted popcorn, ham, bacon, bought soups (which can be very high in salt) and beware of salt in crackers.
5. Get to a healthy weight or as close as you can. If losing weight was easy, everyone would be slim. However, being over weight does increase blood pressure so even losing a few pounds will make a difference. This does not mean going on a starvation diet! A lot of people find that once they reduce salt and add more fruit and vegetables, that they lose a few pounds anyway. If you would like some extra help and advice with your weight, you can book an appointment with the Coeliac Society Dietitian at info@coeliac.ie.

Starting to look after your heart?

There is a lot of advice above. You don't have to do it all at once. Start with one or two changes and make them part of your normal, daily routine. Once they are a habit, you can bring in the next one. There is no rush – if it takes you 3 months or even 6 months to get it all done, that's okay. Do build up your exercise. Not only does it help to lower blood pressure, it also helps to increase your good cholesterol. Lots of reasons to dust off those runners and get out for that walk.