

Coping with stress

How to manage stress and help your heart



Supported by

Stress and your heart health

Everyday life brings with it challenges and unexpected events. These situations can sometimes be described as stressful. Most of us have experienced a level of stress at some time or other in our lives. Stress is a normal part of everyday life.

But one person's experience of stress can be another person's relaxation. Some people thrive on stress, while others find it difficult to cope with. How you deal with stressful situations can have a significant impact on your heart health, and your general health too.

The information, practical tips, quizzes and action points in this booklet will help you understand more about stress and how it could affect your heart health, and what you can do about it.

The booklet looks at:

- how stress can affect your heart
- how to find your key stress points – the areas of your life that are most stressful for you
- how to recognise when you are feeling stressed
- how some people deal with stress
- how to plan what you can do about stress, and
- where to go for more information and help.



As a leading provider of Group Protection policies for employers, Legal & General is pleased to support this booklet. For more information on Legal & General's Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) policy, please see page 79.

For more information on Group Protection policies and services, please call **0845 072 0751** or email **group.protection@landg.com**

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What is stress?

Stress is a normal part of life and we all experience it from time to time.

Day-to-day frustrations like traffic jams or noisy neighbours, as well as significant life changes like moving house or being made redundant, or long-term situations such as constant financial worries or unemployment, can all contribute to our **stress levels**.

The term **stress** is used to describe the state you may sometimes experience when everything seems too much. You may feel overloaded and unable to meet all the demands placed on you. For example, you may have to juggle the demands of your job and family responsibilities as well as looking after an elderly parent or someone with a long-term illness, making it all too much.

There are some positive aspects to stress. The right amount of pressure may make you feel energetic and able to change up a gear when necessary. But too much stress, or stress which lasts too long, can lead to emotional, psychological and even physical problems.

It is not unusual to feel pressure both at work and at home. But excessive pressure can lead to a build-up of stress which can make us less efficient and poor at making decisions, and could lead to ill health.

Everyone finds different things stressful and can experience different signs and symptoms as a result.

How you cope with pressure is affected by many factors, including how much support is available from those around you, and your personal coping strategies. Some people find certain stressful situations exhilarating, and may actually thrive on the excitement that comes with 'high-risk' activities.

There is an 'optimum' point – where you have enough pressure to perform, but not so much that you get overloaded. Everyone's optimum point is different, and learning where yours is can be important in helping you to manage your own stress levels.

How stressed are people in the UK?

Research shows that one in four people in the UK will suffer some kind of mental health problem in the course of a year. Most of these people suffer from anxiety and depression, much of it stress-related. Most report that they worry constantly, or worry about a lot of things, leading to sleepless nights, poor eating habits and often to higher alcohol consumption.

All these things can have a profound impact on health and wellbeing. Stress-related conditions are now the most common reported cause of sickness absence from work in the UK (see pages 32–33).



How is stress linked to heart disease?

The natural response to a physical threat is known as the **'fight or flight'** response. Your body reacts to the threat by releasing hormones, such as adrenaline, which prepare your body to respond to the threat or challenge, either by fighting or running away.

Fats and sugars are released into the blood to provide us with the extra energy we may need to respond to the challenge. Your muscles tense ready for action and your heart beats faster to carry blood to the muscles and the brain where it is most needed. You then breathe faster, sweat more and your mouth becomes dry.

When and how could stress be harmful?

Our bodies often react to emotional stress in just the same way as if we are faced with a physical threat. You may be having a heated disagreement in a shop over some faulty goods, but your body may feel as if you are having a life-and-death struggle with a wild animal.

Circumstances and general pressures of life can lead to a build-up of stress. If the level of stress becomes unmanageable, it can lead to unhealthy lifestyle behaviours that could be damaging to your heart health. For example, you may feel that, in order to cope, you smoke or drink more, eat unhealthy food as a form of comfort, or take medication. (We explain more about these on pages 13–23.) Stress can also have unwanted physical and emotional effects and make us feel 'drained' or unwell.

To understand how stress can affect your heart, it helps to know what coronary heart disease is and what increases the risk of getting the disease. See What is coronary heart disease? below.

What is coronary heart disease?

Coronary heart disease occurs when the coronary arteries – the arteries that bring oxygen-rich blood to your heart muscle – become blocked or narrowed because of fatty deposits called atheroma.

Angina is the discomfort that occurs when your heart does not get enough blood and oxygen, because the coronary arteries have become narrowed. An angina attack can be brought on by physical activity or emotional stress, or it can sometimes happen when you are resting.

If a piece of atheroma in the wall of a coronary artery wall cracks, a blood clot forms to try to heal the area. This blood clot may block the coronary artery, causing part of the heart to be starved of oxygen-rich blood. This is a **heart attack**.



What increases the risk of getting heart disease?

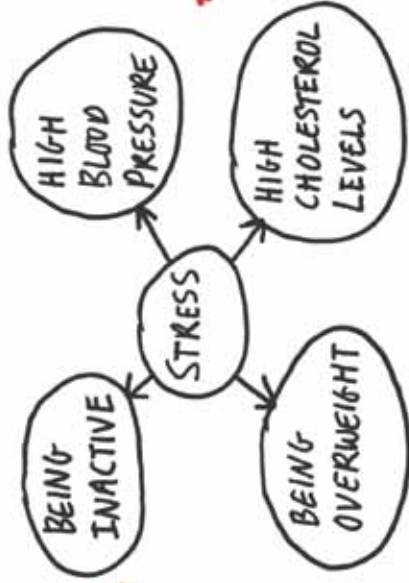
There are several 'risk factors' that increase the risk of getting coronary heart disease. (A risk factor is something which increases your chance of getting the disease.) There are some risk factors for heart disease that you can do something about, and some that you cannot change.

The risk factors for heart disease that you can do something about are:

- smoking
- high blood pressure
- high cholesterol
- being physically inactive
- being overweight, and
- having diabetes.

The risk factors you can't change include:

- having a family history of premature heart disease
- ethnic origin
- age, and
- gender.



How does stress affect the risk of getting heart disease?

There are many theories on how stress could be related to and increase the risk of getting coronary heart disease. The research does not show a direct link between stress and heart disease, but it has **identified how stress can have an impact on the risk factors for the disease** – such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol levels, being overweight and being inactive.

Also, some research studies have suggested that stressful situations lead to the release of hormones that encourage the formation of clots in the blood.

High blood pressure

High blood pressure (hypertension) increases your risk of developing coronary heart disease, having a stroke or having kidney disease. The cause of most high blood pressure is not clear, but the following can all contribute: being overweight, eating too much salt, drinking too much alcohol, and physical inactivity.

Stress and high blood pressure

Being in a pressured environment can make your blood pressure go up. This is a normal response and your blood pressure should return to a normal level once the situation is resolved. Things that cause prolonged pressure – like financial worries or strain at work – may contribute to longer-term high blood pressure.

Managing your stress levels will not prevent you from getting high blood pressure. However, how you cope and deal with the added stress can have either a positive or negative effect on your stress and blood pressure levels. For example:

A positive effect: Doing some form of physical activity – such as going for a brisk walk, or going to the gym – can help to relieve the stress and lower your blood pressure.

A negative effect: Smoking or drinking more, or comfort eating, may feel like temporary stress-relieving activities, but in the long term these will have a negative impact on your general health and your heart health too.

High cholesterol

Cholesterol plays a vital role in how the cells in our body function. But too much cholesterol in the blood increases the risk of getting heart disease.

There are two types of cholesterol:

LDL (low density lipoproteins) is the harmful type of cholesterol. This is sometimes called LDL cholesterol.

HDL (high density lipoproteins) is a protective type of cholesterol. It is sometimes called HDL cholesterol.

The goal is to have a low level of LDL and a high level of HDL cholesterol.

The most common cause of high LDL blood cholesterol levels in the UK is eating too much fat, especially saturated fat. Not being physically active can also play a part. Occasionally, people can have high levels due to an inherited condition.

Stress and cholesterol

There is evidence that, for some people, stress can have an impact on their cholesterol levels. However, more research is needed to understand the relationship between stress and the rise in cholesterol levels.

Diabetes

Currently, 2.4 million people in the UK have been diagnosed with diabetes but it is estimated that by 2015 that figure will have increased to between 3 and 4 million.

Having diabetes increases your risk of getting heart disease, so it is important to understand what your risk of getting diabetes is and do what you can to avoid getting it. If you already have diabetes, controlling your blood sugar will help to reduce your risk of getting heart disease. For more on diabetes, see our booklet *Diabetes and your heart*.

Stress and diabetes

Stressful experiences – such as divorce or workplace stress – can increase the risk of getting diabetes, especially for people who may already have a family history of diabetes. Some studies show that men who suffer from stress are twice as likely to develop diabetes, while women with high stress levels are not at higher risk. Stress may also have an effect on how well diabetes can be controlled.

Being overweight

Being overweight is not only a risk factor for heart disease, but also increases your risk of getting diabetes and some cancers.

Keeping to a healthy weight, or losing weight if you're overweight, can:

- lower blood pressure
- help to control blood sugar levels – which is particularly important for people with diabetes
- control blood cholesterol levels, and
- ease lower back pain and joint pain.

An effective way to manage weight is to combine regular physical activity with healthy eating habits.

Stress and weight

When you are under stress, your body releases high levels of a hormone called cortisol, which leads to strong food cravings, especially for high-sugar and high-fat foods. Eating these foods helps release serotonin, which is known to lift your mood. However, cortisol is also associated with an increase in deposits of fat in the area of the abdomen.

You may find that you cope with stress by over-eating or comfort eating. This is only a temporary solution to relieve stress, and can lead to weight gain and increase the risk of getting type 2 diabetes and coronary heart disease.

Smoking

Smoking is a major risk factor for coronary heart disease. **Smokers have nearly twice the risk of having a heart attack compared with those who have never smoked.** Recreational tobacco smoking, such as shisha smoking, can have the same harmful effects as smoking cigarettes or a pipe.



Stress and smoking

Do you smoke to help ease the feelings of stress? You may think smoking helps you to relax and cope with the added pressure. But in fact that's not the case. When you inhale the smoke, a dose of nicotine reaches the brain very quickly and gives you a rush of adrenaline, making you 'feel good.'

At first, nicotine can improve your mood and concentration, help to decrease feelings of anger and stress, relax your muscles and reduce your appetite. However, **these 'positive' effects are only temporary**, and when they wear off you can experience 'withdrawal symptoms' like irritation and a build-up of tension.

Your brain interprets these symptoms as 'stress', and so you will feel the need for another cigarette. Also, it can be stressful trying to make time and find places to smoke, especially now that all public places in the UK are smoke-free.

Stopping smoking is probably one of the single most important things that you can do to protect your heart health, but this may be even more difficult in periods of increased stress. Knowing what triggers your need for a cigarette can help you to make sure you don't increase the number of cigarettes that you smoke at difficult times. For help with stopping smoking, see our booklet *Stop smoking*, or phone a stop-smoking helpline (see page 72).

Being inactive

People who are physically inactive have twice the risk of developing coronary heart disease compared with people who are regularly active.

Physical activity can help you to lose weight, control high blood pressure and increase HDL cholesterol (the 'good' type of cholesterol), and it can help control conditions such as diabetes.



Stress and physical activity

Feeling under pressure or stressed can lead to a feeling of lethargy and lack of desire to take part in physical activity. However, research shows that regular physical activity can

- help reduce stress
- lift your mood
- give you a sense of wellbeing
- help you sleep better, and
- give you more energy.

It does not take a long time for you to feel these positive effects and they can often happen immediately. This will help to encourage you to include physical activity as part of your everyday life.

Physical activity releases endorphins – the ‘feel good’ hormones – so it can often help to improve your mental wellbeing. Both aerobic activity (like brisk walking, running or cycling) and resistance activity (such as using weights in the gym) have been shown to help people with depression. **Being physically active can improve your mood and help you to control your weight.**

Alcohol

Excessive alcohol drinking can lead to high blood pressure. Also, alcohol has little nutritional value and contains lots of calories, which can lead to weight gain.

Stress and alcohol

Some people drink alcohol as a means of coping with a range of problems including money worries, work stress, and relationship problems. They are more likely to do this when other forms of social support are missing.



Depression

There is growing evidence of a link between depression and heart disease, with people who have depression being more likely to develop heart problems. For more about depression, stress and heart disease, see pages 27–29.

Remember that the way you cope with prolonged stress can have an effect on your lifestyle – such as the amount you smoke, your level of physical activity, and what you eat and drink – and could damage your general health and increase your risk of getting coronary heart disease.

Action points

- Look at the risk factors on page 11 and count up how many apply to you. Identify which ones you can do something about and set yourself some realistic goals to tackle them. You could ask your practice nurse to help you with this.
- To help improve your cholesterol levels, have a balanced diet that's low in saturated fat and high in fruit and vegetables, and do regular physical activity.
- If you smoke, you can get help with stopping smoking. Ask your GP or pharmacist, or visit our website, bhf.org.uk
- Keep to the recommended levels for alcohol (see page 58).
- If you are over 40 years old, ask your GP for a cardiovascular risk assessment. This is a heart health check that gives you valuable information about your risk factors for heart disease and on what you can do to keep your heart healthy.
- Think about whether stress may be causing you to lead a lifestyle that is increasing your risk of heart disease. For example, when you are stressed, do you find that you smoke more, or eat unhealthy 'comfort foods'?

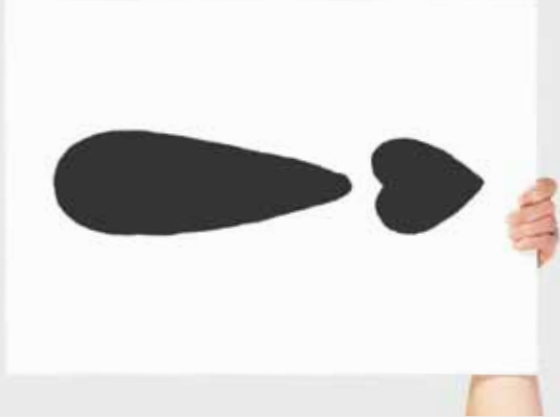
See pages 51–69 for information on how to cope with stress. For more information on how to keep your heart healthy, see our booklet *Keep your heart healthy*.

Stress and health for people who have heart problems

Being unwell can be stressful, as it can affect your performance and moods. If you have been diagnosed with heart disease, or if you have had a heart attack or heart surgery, you may feel a bit low, worried or frightened.

You may be concerned about going back to work, supporting your family, or doing things you enjoyed before your heart attack or surgery. You may also be concerned about having another heart attack.


All of these are common concerns. For more information about life after a heart attack, see our DVD *Looking forward*, and our booklets *Heart surgery*, *Heart attack* and *Cardiac rehabilitation*.



Your cardiac rehabilitation nurse or GP can give you advice and reassurance. They can help make your return to life outside hospital as stress-free as possible. You can also call the British Heart Foundation's confidential Heart HelpLine on **0300 330 3311** if you need information on heart disease and how to improve your lifestyle.

For some people who have coronary heart disease (people who have angina, or who have had a heart attack), extreme stress can trigger an angina attack or, very rarely, a heart attack.

However, it is not true that you should avoid all stress in future in case it causes another heart attack. This mistaken belief may make people over-protective towards you – for example, stopping you from doing any form of physical activity. It is important to remember that some stress in life is positive, particularly if it allows you to do activities that you enjoy. You may find that boredom is as stressful as having too much to do! Talk to your GP or cardiac rehabilitation nurse about any concerns you have and for advice on the best sorts of activities for you.

A woman with dark curly hair is holding a white sign with both hands. The sign contains text about her experience with depression and recovery.

When I was told I'd have to be on heart medication for the rest of my life I got very depressed. It was a constant reminder of my illness. But talking to a fellow patient made me understand that the medication was there to help me, and that I could move forward and have a good life. It took time though. At first I couldn't tell my partner how I felt and I lost my appetite. Then, with help from the cardiac rehab team and a BHF Nurse who visited me I began to feel much better about things.


I know some people can get depressed because of the stress in their lives, and I think women today get stressed because they're often under pressure from working and being a Mum. We need to think about ourselves too. After all, if you don't have your health, what do you have?

Julia Leacock Martin
36, Rochester

Depression, stress and heart disease

Depression is caused by chemical changes in the brain and may be linked to a number of factors: long-term stressful situations; personal factors such as family or work problems; having a traumatic or unexpected event such as a heart attack; having a family member with a disability; or developing a long-term illness. Stress and depression are sometimes linked, but stress does not always result in depression, and stress is not the only cause of depression.

Depression can lead to unhealthy behaviours, such as comfort eating or loss of appetite, lack of motivation, and lethargy leading to decreased physical activity. It can also affect recovery from recent surgery or from a heart attack.

A woman with dark hair in a ponytail is performing a handstand against a plain, light-colored background. She is wearing a green tank top and black leggings. Her right hand is planted on the ground, supporting her weight, while her left hand holds a white rectangular sign. Her legs are extended upwards, with her feet together and toes pointed. Her head is tucked down towards her knees.

IMPROVE
YOUR BODY
AND MIND!

Physical activity is known to reduce symptoms of depression. If you experience depression, increasing the amount of physical activity you do may help to improve your mental health and your rate of recovery after a heart attack or heart surgery, and may improve your heart health too.

Some of the symptoms of anxiety or depression may be similar to those for stress (see pages 40–41). However, if you have experienced some of the following symptoms for most of the day, every day for more than two weeks, you should seek help from your GP:

- sleep problems
- appetite or weight changes
- loss of interest in daily activities
- feelings of helplessness and hopelessness
- loss of energy
- feeling worthless
- difficulty concentrating.

Your GP may be able to help you to identify things that are causing undue pressure in your life. He or she may refer you to a counsellor, psychologist or psychiatrist. You may need medication to help you deal with your situation. **Any form of depression can become a serious health problem and should not be ignored.** If you feel that your situation is such that you are overwhelmed or unable to cope with everyday life, you should seek help (see pages 70–71).

I used to sell health club memberships, but, ironically, with all the pressure to meet unrealistic targets, it ended up being bad for my health. I always was a worrier, and instead of dealing with the stress, I just tried to live with it. I wasn't thinking about my diet, ate unhealthy food and went to smoky bars in the evening.

It's much better now – in my new job I still have deadlines, but there's less pressure. I still get stressed, but I've found ways of coping with it. I swim regularly, relax by listening to classical music, meditate twice a day and take much more care about what I am eating - I feel so much better. I visualise having radiant health every day. You need to take time to think about the things that help you take it easy – and then enjoy them!

DANIEL ANDERSON
47, NORTH LONDON



What makes you stressed?

Few of us go through life without any stress. Thinking about which areas of your life are most stressful is the first step to finding ways of coping with them better or avoiding them altogether.

Most people can cope with periods of stress that last only for a short time. **Stress over a long period can be much harder to deal with**, and is more likely to lead to unhealthy behaviours that increase the risk of getting coronary heart disease and other health problems.

The most common situations causing stress are listed below. Sometimes there are no obvious causes.

The most common causes of stress:

- Work
- Money problems
- Relationships – either between two people or within a family
- Major life events and upheavals like getting married, divorce or separation, unemployment, moving house or bereavement
- Time pressure
- Loneliness and social isolation.

Work

Half a million people in the UK believe that work-related stress is making them ill. Research has shown that you are more likely to feel stressed when you feel you have little control over your work, but have a lot of demands placed on you. Other research has shown that people who do manual jobs are more likely to feel that they are in a stressful situation than people who do non-manual jobs.

Although you may not be able to change the nature of your job, you can take steps to manage stress both at work and at home. Work may be a cause of stress, or it may be the place where your stress shows up.



Signs and symptoms of stress at work can include:

- poor work performance
- lack of concentration
- feeling tired, or
- taking lots of sick leave.

One in five people in the UK feels 'very' or 'extremely' stressed by their work. Over half say their jobs are getting more stressful and that work is overtaking their home lives.

Stress-related conditions are now the most common reported cause of sickness absence from work in the UK.

It is estimated that about 13.4 million working days are lost each year through anxiety and stress-related conditions, and stress-related illness costs employers in Great Britain more than £3.7 billion a year.

Employers are required by law to manage the workplace environment to reduce stress levels and look after the wellbeing of their employees. If you are feeling very stressed at or by work, talk to your manager. Your employer may be able to provide opportunities for you to develop some skills to help you cope with stress – such as relaxation, assertiveness or time-management skills.

You may also be able to get support through informal channels – for example, talking to a sympathetic colleague or a friend about workplace stress.

Money problems

Money problems can cause high levels of stress and depression. They can cause relationships to break up – people to lose their homes, and families to split up – all of which are additional sources of stress.

It is important to get advice on controlling debt early on, before problems become overwhelming. For help and advice, contact the Government's National Debtline on **0808 808 4000**. A Citizens' Advice bureau can advise you about the options available for dealing with any financial or housing problems. (Look them up in your local phone book.)

Relationships

Relationships – with your partner, children, parents, friends, neighbours or work colleagues – don't always run smoothly, and can be the cause of considerable stress. If you don't have someone you can confide in and trust, this can add to any stress you are experiencing. And if you are having problems in one area of your life, it can put a strain on your relationships with everyone else.

Whatever the problem with a relationship, the first step towards dealing with it is to acknowledge it and try to work things through together. Try to talk through the issues, stay positive, look at what you can do to improve things, and accept that some things are outside your control. Reflect on your choices.

Major life events

Any major life change can be stressful. Stress may be triggered by unexpected events like losing a job, bereavement or illness, divorce or separation, or by planned changes such as getting married, moving house or having a baby (which is not always planned).

How you deal with the event will depend on how prepared you were for it, how long it lasts, and how much support you have. Sometimes several life events happen at once and this can 'tip your balance' from being moderately stressed to being unable to cope. Where possible, avoid taking on too many potentially stressful situations at once.

Time pressure

Be realistic about what you can achieve, learn to say 'No,' and prioritise. See Manage your time on page 63. Making time for leisure, exercise and holidays is just as essential as spending time on the things we have to get done at home or at work.

Loneliness and social isolation

Loneliness and social isolation are major causes of stress, particularly for older people. Loneliness has been shown to affect health and mental wellbeing. People who are lonely are more likely to find everyday experiences more stressful and at the same time they get less support from others to cope with this stress.




“

I looked after my Mum, who had Parkinson's Disease, for ten years. It was worrying, of course, and sometimes it was difficult to fit everything into a day but I thought I could just take it all in my stride. After Mum died, I had two heart attacks and it was my cardiac rehabilitation nurse, Bev, who taught me not to bottle everything up – to let go and have a good weep – to let all the stress out.

I hadn't realised how much I had been dealing with looking after my mother. Talking to someone, having relaxing hobbies, and being active help. I love to walk in the mountains on my holidays - there's nothing like it to blow away your cares.

”

*Ina Taylor,
66, Mansfield*



How stressed are you?

We all experience 'stress' in different ways. What one person finds stressful might be an enjoyable challenge to someone else. For each of us, there is **'good stress' as well as 'bad stress'** – for example, being under pressure to get something done may motivate you to get it done. However, some experiences – such as being made redundant or being bereaved – can have a negative effect.



Not sure if you're stressed?

When you are exposed to long periods of stress, your body gives you a warning that something is wrong. These physical, emotional, behavioural and mental signs should not be ignored. They tell you that you need to slow down. If you continue to be stressed and you don't give your body a break, you may develop health problems.

If you think you might be experiencing stress, you need to tune into your early warning signs and think about how you feel, how it shows and how it affects other people. Look at pages 40–43 for possible warning signs and symptoms and tick those that apply to you.

Check out your warning signs and symptoms of stress

Physical

Do you experience...

feeling sweaty or shivery?

heart beating fast?

dry mouth?

headache?

loss of appetite for food, fun or sex?

weight gain or loss?

tight, knotty feelings in your stomach?

needing to go to the toilet a lot more than usual?

difficulty sleeping, disturbed nights or waking early?

tiredness or exhaustion?

odd aches and pains?

Emotional

Do you often feel...

upset?

irritable?

tearful?

worried?

sick in the stomach?

isolated from people around you?

Behavioural

Do you...

smoke or drink more than you used to?

lack a sense of humour?

neglect your personal appearance?

forget things?

work until you're exhausted?

clench your jaws or grind your teeth?

withdraw from relationships or social situations?

start tasks and not finish them?

lack concentration?

Mental

Do you think...

I can't do this

I'll never finish

I can't cope

everything is pointless

Many of these signs and symptoms can be associated with general health problems and can be a natural reaction to dealing with short-term problems. **Add up how many boxes you ticked.**

If you ticked more than four boxes, you may be suffering from prolonged stress.

If you ticked fewer than four boxes, you may not be suffering adversely from stress at the moment.

The Am I stressed? quiz on the next page can help you identify how you view your current situation.

How stressed are you?

Quiz: Am I stressed?

Check your stress levels by **ticking the answers below** that best describe you.

1. **Which of the following best describes how much time you have to do everything you need to do?**

- A** I have enough time to get everything done.
- B** I usually manage to get most things done.
- C** I have to prioritise my time very carefully.
- D** I always seem to be short of time and rushing to catch up.

2. **When you are under a lot of pressure, do you:**

- A** cope well because it doesn't happen very often?
- B** put in more effort so you can get through the difficult patch?
- C** give yourself breathing space and time to take stock?
- D** drink lots of coffee, and keep going until you're exhausted?

3. **How well do you usually sleep?**

- A** I sleep really well and feel rested in the morning.
- B** I sometimes have trouble falling asleep, but generally get enough sleep.
- C** I use relaxation methods and clear my mind before I go to bed.
- D** I have frequent restless nights and often wake early.

4. **Which of the following best describes the way you deal with difficult situations?**

- A** I rarely get ruffled about things.
- B** I get annoyed a bit more often than I used to.
- C** I have a shorter fuse now than I used to, but I think before I react to things.
- D** I regularly lose my temper at the smallest things.

5. Which option best describes how much time you have for the things you enjoy?

- A** I regularly spend time doing things I enjoy.
- B** I have less and less time to do the things I enjoy.
- C** Time is tight, but I make sure I have some time each day to relax and enjoy life.
- D** I don't have time for hobbies or things I enjoy.

6. Which option best describes how you feel most of the time?

- A** I feel fine and able to cope with things.
- B** I sometimes get headaches, which are worse when I'm under pressure.
- C** I'm under pressure, but I use relaxation methods to make sure I don't get too tense.
- D** I often feel tearful and panicky because of the pressure I am under.

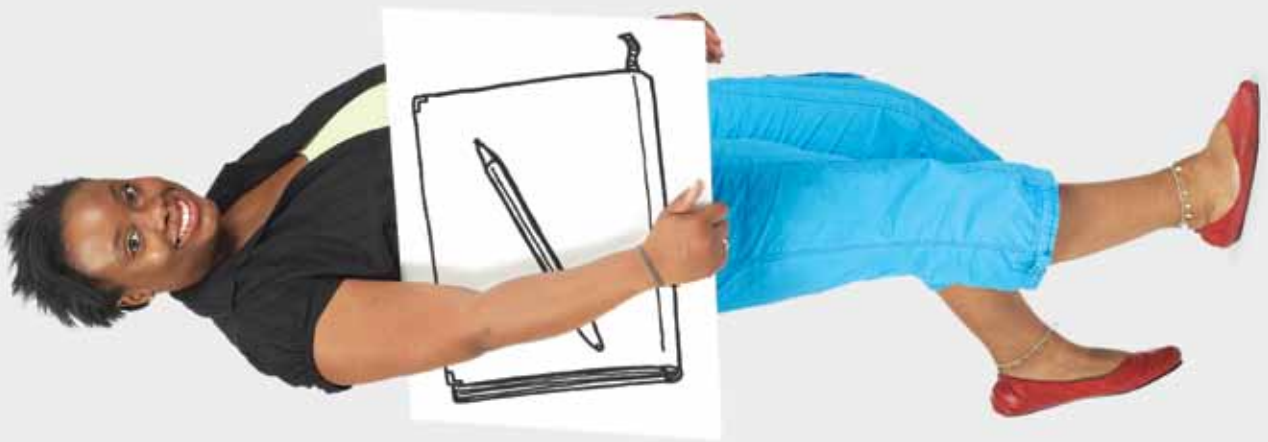
Add up how many A, B, C and D answers you gave.

Mostly As It appears from your answers that you are not under a great deal of stress. You have a good balance in your life at the moment. Look out for signs of becoming stressed in the future.

Mostly Bs You seem to be experiencing some stress and are feeling the consequences in various aspects of your life. Try taking positive steps to deal with this stress – for example, by taking regular exercise, making time for yourself, and getting any support you need.

Mostly Cs While you experience some stress, you have developed a range of skills to cope with this. Well done for recognising that stress needs to be dealt with – and for coming up with ways like relaxation and time management to help you to get on with life.

Mostly Ds You seem to be experiencing a lot of stress and this may adversely affect both your physical health and your relationships. Think about how you might start to reduce your stress levels (see What can you do about stress? on pages 51-69). You could talk to someone about how stress is making you feel (see Getting help on page 70).



Keep a diary

If you feel stressed, or if your results from the Am I stressed? quiz suggest that you might be, it's a good idea to keep a diary for a few days.

This will help you pinpoint common triggers for stressful situations in your life, how you react to the stress and what helps you cope, so that you can manage the cause of your stress more effectively.

See the example Stress diary on page 47.

When you feel stressed, note down in your diary:

- what triggered the feeling of being stressed (for example – if you missed the bus)
- how stressed you felt, on a scale of 0 to 5, where 5 is the most stressed
- any signs or symptoms of stress – such as dry mouth, or being tearful (see pages 40–41)
- how well you coped, on a scale of 0 to 3, where 0 is poorly and 3 is well, and
- what helped (for example – if you went for a walk, or had a break).

When you have completed your diary, you will:

- be able to see the different triggers you experienced, and which ones were most stressful
- notice some common warning signs or symptoms of stress, and
- be able to see the things which helped you manage your stress well.

IDENTIFY THE TRIGGER



ASSESS HOW YOU FELT




ASSESS HOW YOU COPEd



IDENTIFY WHAT HELPED

Stress diary

| Trigger | How stressed you felt Score 0 – 5 (0 = least to 5 = most) | Signs or symptoms of stress | How well you coped Score 0 – 3 (0 = poorly to 3 = well) | What helped? | | | | | | | |
|---------|--|-----------------------------|--|--------------|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|
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A person wearing a red, blue, and white plaid shirt and black pants is holding a white rectangular sign. The sign contains a quote in black, handwritten-style text. The person's hands are visible at the top corners of the sign. The background is a plain, light gray.

" MOST PEOPLE ARE
ABOUT AS HAPPY
AS THEY MAKE UP
THEIR MINDS TO BE "

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

Action points

- Take time to think about the pressures in your life.
- Tune in to your early warning signs and think about:
 - how you feel
 - how it shows, and
 - how it may be affecting others.
- Go through the checklist on pages 40–41 to find your main signs and symptoms of stress.
- Complete the Am I stressed? quiz on pages 42–43 to check your stress levels.
- Keep a stress diary for a few days.
- Look at your diary to see which are the key pressures in your life.
- Plan to manage these pressures using things you have tried that worked well in the past, or other ideas in this booklet.



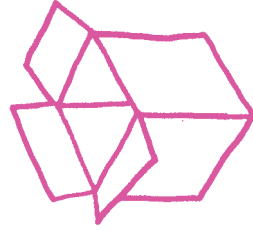
What can you do about stress?

There are a number of ways to tackle stress in your life. **Think about whether you can do any of the following.**

Avoid the sources of your stress

Once you have pinpointed the main sources of stress in your life, think about what you could do to avoid them. For example:

- **If traffic jams are causing you stress**, think about how you can change your journey to work. For example, can you leave earlier or later, or can you walk, cycle or use public transport part or all of the way, or take a different route to work?
- **If your workload is too great**, talk to your manager and ask if you can have extra help, attend a time management course or have some extra training.
- **If you are having family problems**, talk things through with those close to you. Plan to have some time enjoying things together. Or think about having some counselling.
- **If you are just too busy**, prioritise and drop some of your commitments.



THINK OUTSIDE THE

Change how you respond to stressful situations

If you can't remove the source of your stress, try to focus on changing your attitude towards it. Think about how you respond both physically and mentally when you are in a stressful situation.

Physical response

When you are stressed, you may get physical symptoms such as tense muscles, taking short, fast breaths, or feeling butterflies in your stomach. Instead, take some slow, deep breaths, or try some relaxation techniques (see pages 60–61), and remind yourself that getting stressed won't help the situation.

Mental response

When pressure mounts up, it's easy to become defensive, frustrated, angry or depressed. If you start to feel that you're getting stressed, take a step back. Give yourself some space, take some time and plan what you can do to ease the situation.

If you have negative thoughts going through your mind – like 'I can't cope', or 'I'm useless' – try challenging them with more positive thoughts, such as, 'I know I will get through this in time' or 'There are lots of things I am good at and valued for.'

“

As a university lecturer I did feel the pressure to perform, especially in front of large audiences, which could be quite stressful. And the work and the travel left me too tired to do any exercise. Now I work from home it's much better, but there are still stresses and strains – especially if my baby son's being very demanding when I'm trying to work.

I find going to the gym's great for de-stressing, and yoga helps me relax so I try to make sure it's part of my daily/weekly routine. It can be all too easy to make an excuse not to leave the house! Peace and quiet's important too - you need to learn to enjoy yourself, take things a bit easier, and enjoy the present.

”

Haider Ali
43, North London



Make changes to your lifestyle to help reduce the effects of stress on your body

Top healthy lifestyle tips to tackle stress:

- Eat well
- Keep physically active
- Keep alcohol to within healthy limits
- Don't smoke
- Learn to relax
- Make time for rest
- Manage your time
- Seek help and get support.

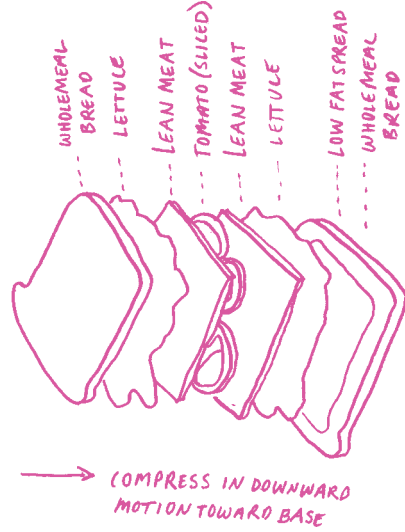
Eat well

Your body is able to fight stressful situations better when you take the time to eat well. Try to:

- eat regular meals
- eat a wide variety of healthy foods
- have at least 5 portions of fruit and vegetables a day
- make sure that at least one-third of your food comes from bread, pasta, beans, rice, potatoes or pulses
- choose foods low in saturated fat
- cut down on salt and sugar
- have less tea, coffee and other drinks with caffeine, and drink plenty of water
- reach a healthy weight and maintain it, and
- combine healthy eating habits with a regular physical activity programme.

For more on healthy eating, see our booklet *Eating well*.

THE ANATOMY OF A SANDWICH.



Keep physically active

Moderate-intensity physical activity (activity that gets you warm and slightly out of breath) has been shown to release endorphins – natural substances that help you feel better and maintain a positive attitude. Doing regular physical activity for 30 minutes a day on at least five days a week will help you cope with stress.

It will also:

- lower your risk of coronary heart disease, diabetes and stroke
- provide you with more energy and stamina
- help to you to maintain a healthy weight, and
- help to reduce the risk of some cancers.

The 30 minutes can be split into smaller time slots of at least 10 minutes at a time.

Choose activities that you enjoy and set yourself realistic reasonable goals. Or choose different activities each day to keep you interested and motivated. Even a brisk half-hour walk every day can make a difference to how you feel, look and cope with life.

If you have high blood pressure or get angina, or if you have another medical condition, you should talk to your GP before suddenly increasing your activity levels or taking up any new activity.

Keep alcohol to within healthy limits

When you feel stressed, you might be tempted to look for easy solutions such as the relaxed feeling you may get from alcohol. But drinking too much can be harmful for your heart and your health (see page 22).

Men should not regularly drink more than **3 to 4 units in a day**. **Women** should not regularly drink more than **2 to 3 units in a day**.

1 unit of alcohol =

a small glass (100ml) of wine
(10% ABV [alcohol by volume])

or

half a pint (about 300ml) of normal-strength lager, cider or beer (for example, 3.5% ABV)

or

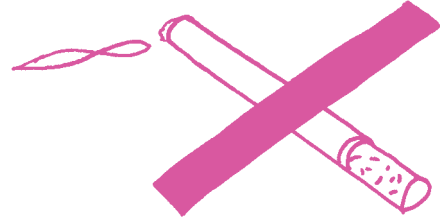
a pub measure (25ml) of spirits



Don't smoke

If you smoke, stopping smoking is the single most important thing you can do to improve your heart health, and your general health too.

If you have already tried to quit smoking but have started again, ask your doctor or pharmacist about the stop-smoking aids now available. Getting professional help can increase your chance of success. For more information, see our booklet *Stop smoking*.



Learn to relax

Learning how to relax is a very good way to cope with stress of any kind, and can promote a feeling of wellbeing. **It also reduces anxiety, irritability, and pain caused by tense muscles such as neck ache, back ache and headache.**

Once you are practised at doing it, you will find it makes a noticeable difference to your mood and to your energy – not just when you are stressed, but also at other times. It can also have a protective effect on your mental wellbeing – helping to prevent some common mental health problems.

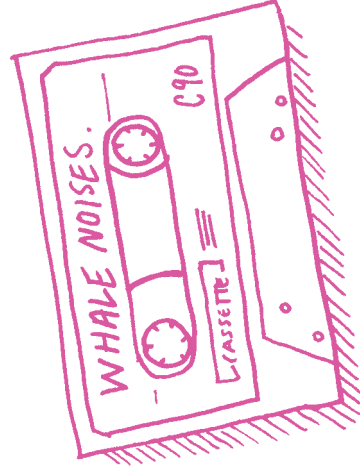
Relaxation is more than just sitting back and being quiet. It is an active process involving techniques that calm your body and mind. Finding relaxation activities that help you unwind and fitting them into your daily life will actually give you **more energy and make you more effective at the things you have to get done.**

The quick relaxation routine

1. Tune into your breathing. Take one deep breath in, hold it, and then tell yourself to let go as you breathe out through your mouth. Breathe naturally for a while, and then repeat the deep breath and ‘letting go’ with your outward breath.
2. Tense up and then relax a single muscle group such as your hand, your foot or stomach. When you let go, try to let all the unnecessary tension slip away. Do the same for some other muscle groups.
3. Drop your shoulders.
4. Apply your relaxation skills in increasingly testing situations. You will soon begin to benefit.

You could combine relaxation exercises with your favourite music. Choose something that lifts your mood or that you find soothing. Some people find it easier to relax while listening to specially designed relaxation audio tapes, which provide music and relaxation instructions. You can download and listen to a range of podcasts from the Mental Health Foundation to help you relax (see www.mentalhealth.org.uk/information/wellbeing-podcasts).

Other popular ways to relax include yoga, pilates and meditation. You could join a local class for one of these, or practise at home. Once you find a relaxation method that works for you, practise it every day for at least 30 minutes.



Make time for rest

Even with a healthy diet and exercise, you can't fight stress effectively without rest. You need time to recover from exertion and stressful events.

Make enough time to relax your mind as well as your body. It could be sitting down with the newspaper, going for a short walk, or having a cup of tea with a friend. Some people find that switching off and taking a nap during the day helps reduce their stress.



Manage your time

For many of us, life is filled with too many demands and too little time. For the most part, over-ambitious goals are ones we have chosen ourselves. This drive to juggle too much means we lose out on time for ourselves. It helps to learn how to manage your time well.

Effective time-management skills involve setting priorities, asking for help when appropriate, pacing yourself and taking time out for yourself.



Seek help and get support

If you feel that things are getting on top of you, try talking about it. Whatever is causing you stress, you can do a lot to help yourself by talking it through with your family or friends. They may be able to 'stand back' from the situation and together you can identify things that will help.

It is better to ask for help rather than struggling on pretending to be able to cope. Speak to someone you trust about the things that are causing you stress. There is support available – use it. See Getting help, on pages 70–71.



Plan your stress-busting activities for the week

You need to build some 'stress-busting activities' into your day, your week, and your life.

- Think about the week ahead.
- Think through the commitments that you have and the likely 'danger spots' for stressful situations (such as a difficult meeting at work, or a child's birthday party).
- Now plan the stress-busting activities that you are going to build into your week. Go through the list on pages 66 and 67 and choose which ones you will include as part of your plan to de-stress.

Stress-busting activities

Work

If work is stressing you out:

- talk to your manager and together make some changes
- seek advice from your human resources department
- talk to a colleague or friend.

Relaxation

You can do this by:

- sitting down and taking some deep breaths
- doing a series of stretches
- taking up a new hobby or activity
- practising yoga, pilates or meditation.

Problem-solving

Ask yourself:

- What is the real problem?
- What can I do differently?
- Reflect on the outcome. Did doing things differently work?
- If it didn't work, try another action plan.

Time management

- Prioritise tasks and plan your day accordingly.
- Do one thing at a time.
- Have realistic short-term and long-term strategies for getting things done.

- Learn to say 'No'. At work, at home, and with friends, you sometimes need to put yourself first. Remember to be assertive. Being assertive allows you to stand up for your rights and beliefs while respecting those of others.
- Be realistic about what you can achieve, know your own limits, and celebrate success at every opportunity.
- If you feel overwhelmed, talk about it with a friend, partner or manager.

Some of these changes can take time to develop.

Don't expect to be able to change everything at once or to get it 'right' first time. Expecting too much of yourself will possibly add more stress. **Be kind to yourself.**

The benefits of stress-busting activities

Building some stress-busting activities into your week will mean that:

- you protect yourself from health problems associated with stress
- you are more efficient at getting things done
- you have more time for the things you enjoy
- you enjoy better relationships with family, friends and work colleagues, and
- you feel much better.

The stress chain

This shows you some examples of ways to cope with stress, and how to react more positively to stressful situations.

| When you are feeling stressed | What you can do |
|---|---|
| Be aware of it. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Keep a stress diary (see pages 45–47).• Make a ‘hassle list’ – a list of all the things that cause you stress.• Look out for early warning signs of stress (see pages 40–41). |
| Reduce the chance of it happening again. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Manage your time.• Say ‘No’ sometimes.• Avoid your stress hot spots where possible.• Get help and support. |
| Change how you think or feel about stress. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Get the balance right in your life.• Take a positive approach.• Accept what you can’t change. |
| Change how you react to it. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Communicate with your partner and others.• Be assertive about your needs.• Keep things in perspective.• Use relaxation skills like deep breathing.• Use humour. |
| Reduce the effects of stress on your body. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Eat well.• Be physically active.• Have a massage.• Relax. |

Action points

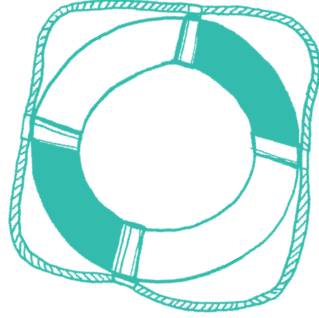
- Avoid sources of stress if you can.
- If you feel stress coming on, take a step back, breathe deeply, and take stock.
- Keep things in perspective.
- Make sure you get regular, healthy meals, and cut down on comfort food if it is unhealthy.
- Get plenty of exercise – whatever you enjoy doing.
- Limit alcohol to recommended levels.
- Make sure you have plenty of rest and relaxation.
- Manage your time by prioritising and learning to say 'No'.
- Talk to someone about your feelings if you are finding things difficult.
- Get the help and support you need.

COUNT TO TEN
- THEN THINK AGAIN -

Getting help

You should ask for professional help:

- if the information in this booklet is not enough
- if you are regularly affected by some of the symptoms of stress
- if stress is affecting your ability to work, or to cope with your life or your relationships with others
- if you think you might have depression (see pages 27–29)
- if you are drinking too much or are using drugs to cope with stress, or
- if a friend or your partner asks you to get help.



There are many sources of professional help.

The first thing to do is to talk to your GP. He or she may be able to help, or may refer you to another health professional.

Or you may want to find a private practitioner. To find a qualified counsellor, psychotherapist or psychologist, contact one of the organisations below, or ask at your local library.

British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies

Victoria Buildings
9-13 Silver Street
Bury BL9 0EU
Phone: 0161 797 4484
Website: www.babcp.com

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy

BACP House
15 St John's Business Park
Lutterworth
Leicestershire LE17 4HB
Phone: 01455 883316
Website: www.bacp.co.uk

British Psychological Society

St Andrews House
48 Princess Road East
Leicester LE1 7DR
Phone: 0116 254 9568
Website: www.bps.org.uk

Where to go for more information

Alcohol

Al-Anon Family Groups

Phone: 0207 403 0888
www.al-anonuk.org.uk

Alcohol Concern

Phone: 020 7264 0510
www.alcoholconcern.org.uk

Alcoholics Anonymous

Helpline: 0845 769 7555
www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk

Financial problems

National Debtline

Phone: 0800 808 4000
www.nationaldebtline.co.uk

Health at work

bhf.org.uk/healthatwork

The BHF Health at work website includes ideas, tools and downloads to support workplace health promoters.

Bereavement

CRUSE Bereavement Care

Helpline: 0844 477 9400
www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk

Bullying

For information about how to tackle bullying at school, visit www.bbc.co.uk/schools and search for 'bullying'.

Carers

Carers Line

Phone: 0800 808 7777
A freephone helpline providing advice to carers about their legal rights and entitlements. See also How the British Heart Foundation can help you, on pages 74–75.

Think fit! Think well! A guide to developing a workplace mental wellbeing programme

A resource to support health promoters in developing a mental wellbeing programme at work.

Healthy lifestyle

For booklets on healthy lifestyle – physical activity, stopping smoking and healthy eating – see pages 74–75.

Freephone helplines for people who want to stop smoking:

BHF Smoking Helpline

Phone: 0800 169 1900
www.bhf.org.uk/smoking

NHS Smoking Helpline

Phone: 0800 022 4 332
www.smokefree.nhs.uk

Quitline

Phone: 0800 00 22 00
www.quit.org.uk

Mental illness including depression

Anxiety UK (formerly The National Phobics Society)

Phone: 08444 775 774
www.anxietyuk.org.uk

Depression Alliance

Phone: 0845 123 23 20
www.depressionalliance.org

Mental Health Foundation

Phone: 020 7803 1100
www.mentalhealth.org.uk

MIND

Mind Info Line: 0845 766 0163
www.mind.org.uk

No Panic

Helpline: 0808 808 0545
www.nopanic.org.uk
A free helpline for people suffering from panic attacks, phobias, obsessive-compulsive disorders and other anxiety-related disorders.

The Samaritans

Phone: 08457 90 90 90
www.samaritans.org.uk

Saneline

Phone: 0845 767 8000
www.sane.org.uk

A helpline offering information and advice on all aspects of mental health for individuals, and their families or friends.

Relationships

Childline

Phone: 0800 1111
www.childline.org.uk
Children and young people can call this free, confidential helpline, about any problem, at any time – day or night.

Parentline

Phone: 0808 800 2222
Email: parentsupport@parentlineplus.org.uk
www.parentlineplus.org.uk

Relate

Phone: 0300 100 1234
www.relate.org.uk

Stress management

International Stress Management Association

Phone: 01179 697284
www.isma.org.uk
Email: stress@isma.org.uk

Stress at Work

www.hse.gov.uk/stress
A website on stress in the workplace.

How the British Heart Foundation can help you

We are the nation's heart charity, dedicated to saving lives through pioneering research, patient care, campaigning for change, and providing vital information.

You might find some of the following resources helpful:

Booklets

Our heart health catalogue

For you, for family and friends, for health professionals

Get active, stay active

Enjoy being active and keep your heart healthy

Be active for life

Over 50? Keep your heart healthy with physical activity

Put your heart into walking

It's easy, it's free, it's great for your heart

Physical activity and your heart

For people who have a heart condition or are at risk of developing heart disease

Take control of your weight

Safe ways to lose weight for heart health

Eating well

How to keep food fun and good for your heart

Cut down on salt

It's easy to do and good for your heart

Stop smoking

How to quit for a healthy heart

DVD

Risking it

This DVD follows five ordinary people, all of whom have one or more risk factors for coronary heart disease. They have decided to start taking responsibility for their health and take positive action.

For information on other BHF booklets and DVDs ask for a copy of *Our heart health catalogue*.

How to order our resources

To order any of our booklets or DVDs:

- call the BHF Orderline on **0870 600 6566**
- email **orderline@bhf.org.uk**
- visit **bhf.org.uk/publications**

You can also download many of our publications from our website.

Our booklets are free of charge, but we would welcome a donation so we can continue our vital work. (Turn the page to see how you can make a donation.)

Heart Matters

Heart Matters is our **free**, personalised service to help you live with a healthy heart. Join Heart Matters today to access benefits including *heart matters* magazine, a HelpLine and an online members' area with recipes, articles and lifestyle tools. Register online at **bhf.org.uk/heartmatters** or call **0300 330 3300** (a local rate number).

We need your help... to continue our life-saving work

As a charity we rely on the generosity of people like you to fund our vital work. Thousands of people with heart disease turn to us for help every year and even more will need us in the future. **We want to be there for them.**

Please donate today and together we can beat heart disease for good.

If you would like to make a donation:

- please call our donation hotline on **0300 330 3322**,
- contact us through our website at **bhf.org.uk/donate**
- or fill in the form on the next page and post it to us at the address on the back cover.

Other ways you can help

There are many other ways you can play a crucial role in our efforts to beat heart disease:

- Become a volunteer and help run our shops, events or services for local communities. To find out more, call **0845 130 8663** or visit **bhf.org.uk/volunteer**
- Have fun on a sponsored run, bike ride or walk. For more on this, call **0844 477 1181** or visit **bhf.org.uk/events**
- Join our *Heartstart* initiative and learn to save lives with the skills of emergency life support. Over 2.3 million people already have. For more information contact **heartstart@bhf.org.uk**
- Donate goods to your local BHF shop. To find out where your nearest BHF shop is, call **0844 412 5000**.
- Give in celebration by offering your party guests the chance to donate to us instead of buying gifts, for example for your wedding anniversary or birthday. Visit **bhf.org.uk/celebrate** for more information.

Thank you.





Your support will help us prevent early deaths

Here is my gift to help more people recover from

heart problems £10 £15 £20 Other £

Please make your cheque / postal order/CAF voucher payable to the British Heart Foundation.

Title (Mr/Mrs/Miss/Other) First name Surname

Address

Postcode

Email

We would like to keep in touch with you, to let you know your support has made a difference.

By supplying your email address you agree that the BHF may use this to contact you about our work.

OR please debit the above sum from my:

AMEX CAF Card MasterCard Visa / Delta Maestro

Card number

(Maestro only)

Valid from / Expiry date / Issue no

(Maestro only)

Signature Date / /

Please tick here if you do not wish the British Heart Foundation to contact you. (MP0059)

From time to time we allow other similar organisations to write to our supporters.

If you do not wish to be contacted by them, please tick here. (MP0060)

The British Heart Foundation is the nation's heart charity, registered in England and Wales (225971) and in Scotland (SC039426).

giftaid it

Make your gift worth almost a third more – at no extra cost to you!

Are you a UK taxpayer?

If you are a UK taxpayer please **tick the first box** so we can claim back up to **28p** for every **£1** you give **at no extra cost** to you.

GA1 **Yes**, I am a UK taxpayer and would like the BHF to reclaim the tax on any of the donations I have made in the last six years and any future donations I may make.*

Date

GA2 **No**, I am not a UK taxpayer.

* To qualify for Gift Aid, you must pay an amount of UK Income Tax and/or Capital Gains Tax at least equal to the tax that the BHF will reclaim on your donations in the appropriate tax year. Your donation must be of your own money and cannot be a collection.



Please send this form to:

British Heart Foundation

Greater London House
180 Hampstead Road
London NW1 7AW

Thank you.



Legal & General supporting the British Heart Foundation

Legal & General are delighted to be working again with the British Heart Foundation (BHF) to promote health and fitness in the workplace. Over £300,000 has been donated since the partnership began in 2002.

Legal & General are leading providers of risk, savings and investment management and are committed to strong principles of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). It prides itself on consistently contributing at least £2.5m year on year to supporting national and local charities, and social enterprises throughout the UK.

"By working closely with Third Sector partners that link to what we do, the charity gets the support it needs and we gain access to a rich source of knowledge to help us increase our understanding of 'real world' issues and trends that directly relate to our businesses. It is a win-win situation."
Graham Precey, Head of CSR, Legal & General

Legal & General's Group Protection business has enjoyed a beneficial and productive partnership with the BHF, concentrating on the promotion of workplace health and how this helps build better understanding of important health issues that could affect customers in the future.

For more information on Legal & General's CSR policies, please visit www.legalandgeneralgroup.com/csr



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Acknowledgements

The British Heart Foundation would like to thank all the individuals and organisations that have given their time and support to developing this resource.

Have your say

We would welcome your comments to help us produce the best information for you. Why not let us know what you think? Contact us through our website at bhf.org.uk/contact. Or, write to us at the address on the back cover.

Kids and Schools

Do you want the kids in your family to be more active and eat healthier?

Help them make some changes now by encouraging them to visit the following websites:

cbhf.net

a website for 7-11 year olds

yheart.net and **yooobot.co.uk**

websites for 12-19 year olds

Do any of the teenagers in your family have a heart condition?

Visit yheart.net/meet

You can also order resources from Our kids' and schools' catalogue: visit bhf.org.uk/publications, call **0870 600 6566**, or email orderline@bhf.org.uk



HEART HELPLINE

For information and support on anything heart-related



0300 330 3311

local rate number



bhf.org.uk

Phone lines open 9am to 6pm Monday to Friday



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