

# Medical update

When something works as hard as your heart does to keep you alive, it deserves some looking after. Here are some heart facts...

When we discovered these startling facts we realised it was time to make a few changes. So with Valentine thoughts in the air, what better time to learn more about your own heart?

Your heart is a powerful muscle with the vital job of pumping your blood around enabling nutrients and oxygen to reach every cell in your body, taking toxins and waste products away. There are a staggering 60,000 - 100,000 miles of arteries, veins and capillaries to pump approximately 5.6 litres of blood through. You could have as many as 50,000 million capillaries

*Your heart pumps blood through more than 60,000 miles of vessels and 50,000 million capillaries!*

penetrating every part of your body and your heart has to get blood to every nook and cranny. It does this so efficiently that your blood can circulate around your system in as little as 20 seconds. So every minute of every day your blood moves around your body three times and can travel 12,000 miles or more. We think that deserves a bit of respect.

## Hand on your heart

Your heart beats at a rate of about 60 to 80 times a minute - the average is about 70. In one day it will beat 10,000 times and in one year about 35 million times. This means that during an average lifetime of 70 years your heart will beat 2.5 billion times. That's a lot of hard work, yet most of us mistreat our heart and many of us don't even know where it is.

An adult's heart weighs about 8-10oz and is about the size of a clenched fist, so make a fist and put your hand on your heart right now. Like most people you've probably placed your fist on the left-hand side of your chest. In fact

your heart is found almost in the centre, but the bottom is tipped towards the left so you're more aware of your heart beat here.

The good news is that you can make positive changes to your lifestyle to look after your heart, and you can start these right now.

## Making changes

As with all muscles your heart will get weaker if you don't use it and it's been shown that exercise can reduce your risk of heart disease by as much as 40%. You'll need to perform aerobic exercise, which makes you slightly breathless and

raises your pulse, but you don't have to don your lycra and join a gym. In fact you'll be more successful if you find an activity you enjoy and do it with friends. If you haven't exercised for a while, see your GP first, but ideally you should aim for 30 minutes, five times a week. Anything to get you moving more will help, though.

The more we weigh the harder our hearts have to work, so trying to stay within healthy weight limits is important. Start by cutting down on saturated fats - they're found in animal products and are turned into cholesterol by your liver. Fats such as those found in olive oil and oily fish are good for you and research has shown that people who eat a Mediterranean diet could be 25% less likely of dying prematurely. It's tasty too!

Make changes by cutting down on red meat, grill, don't fry and trim off any visible fat. Avoid fast food and meat products such as burgers and sausages. Remove skin from chicken and switch to low fat dairy products. Your taste buds will soon adapt. Cut down on

transfats too - they're often found in margarines and you'll need to read the labels to detect these.

Eat wholegrain foods, beans pulses and plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables. Colourful fruit and vegetables are full of antioxidants. The red of a tomato, the orange of a carrot and green of broccoli are all good for your heart and health.

Salt is another danger lurking particularly in processed foods and ready meals. More than 1.25g of salt per 100g is high. One study showed that if people over 60 cut their salt intake to 6g (that's one teaspoon) a day, they can reduce their risk of stroke by 31% and risk of heart attack by 24% very quickly.

Whilst drinking small amounts of alcohol can have a beneficial effect, smoking just three to six cigarettes a day can double your risk of heart attack. The chemicals in cigarette smoke increase cholesterol and could explain 20% of heart attacks. We all remember those vile TV ads showing thick fat dripping from a cigarette.

There's a direct link with stress, high blood pressure and heart disease, too, so it's important to control stress. You'll already have the perfect antidote to stress in your cross stitching and knitting so use it as an effective tool to control your levels every day.

## A lesson learned

The people of the Japanese island, Okinawa have five times less heart disease through eating a healthy diet, regular exercise and a strong sense of community. We should all take a lesson from their book.

Remember it's always easier to make changes with the support of friends, so chat to other members of Stitchlinks who are making important changes in their lives too. Start small and grow from there, and don't forget to let us know how you get on.



## Did you know?

Flossing your teeth regularly will not only ensure your teeth and mouth are in good health, but you'll have a healthy heart, too!

It's a bit hard to believe I know, but there is a well established link between gum disease, heart disease and stroke. The bacteria that lurk in the plaque on your teeth together with the toxins they produce have an easy access into your bloodstream.

It's known that people with gum disease are more likely to suffer from atherosclerosis (see jargon), which causes a narrowing and clogging of the blood vessels leading to heart attack and stroke.

Dr Michael Roizen of the University of Chicago states that keeping your gums healthy could add 6.4 years to your life!

## Jargon

Making it easier to understand those medical terms

- **Cholesterol** – This is a waxy type of fat made mainly in the liver from saturated fats. It's gained a bad reputation for clogging our arteries, but we wouldn't survive without it. It's essential for keeping our nervous system healthy and helps to make certain hormones. It also forms the building blocks of cell membranes and carries out many important jobs. However, too much of it is dangerous, and high levels of this fatty substance can cause narrowing or complete blockage of the blood vessels.
- **Atherosclerosis** – This comes from the Greek words 'athero' meaning gruel or paste and 'sclerosis' meaning hardness. Some of you may know it as hardening of the arteries. It's a process where deposits of fatty substances build up on the inner lining of the artery walls. This is known as plaque and may cause considerable narrowing or even complete blockage of a vessel, severely impeding or stopping blood flow to that area. Plaque can also break off to form clots that travel to other parts of the body and can be extremely dangerous.
- **ECG** – Short for Electrocardiogram, this is a recording of the electrical activity of the heart as a graph on a moving strip of paper. It can give your doctor very important information on the health and function of your heart. The ECG machine was invented in 1902 by Dutch physiologist Willem Einthoven who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Medicine in 1924 for his invention.



our quick guide to a healthier heart... 

- **Get your blood pressure tested** – high blood pressure has no symptoms, so the only way to find out if your blood pressure is too high is to get tested. Next month we'll be looking at blood pressure in detail and what you can do to help.
  - your food with herbs and spices and check all labels for salt content. You shouldn't eat more than 6g per day (one teaspoon).
  - Cut down on sugar.
- **Get your cholesterol tested** – high will clog up your arteries including the vessels that supply your heart. Saturated fat found in foods such as cream, butter, full fat milk, fried food, red meat, are the main culprits. Aerobic exercise can also help to lower your levels.
  - **Exercise regularly** – it needn't be a chore. Find an aerobic activity you enjoy or join a group. It can reduce your risk of heart disease by up to 40%.
- **Eat a healthy diet** – cut down on saturated fats.
  - **Stop smoking** – every cigarette can take seven minutes off your life. A smoker is three times more likely to have a heart attack. Treat yourself with the money you save.
  - **Cut down on alcohol** – drinking too much damages the heart and increases blood pressure. A healthy guide is 2-3 drinks, 2-3 times per week.
  - **Manage stress** – knitting and cross stitching are great tools for managing stress, which can cause high blood pressure and many other conditions.
  - **Think positive** – positive thinkers have a 55% lower risk of death. This applies to all causes.
- Switch to 'good' fats such as those found in olive oil sunflower oils and fish oils.
- Cut down on transfats – read your labels as these are hidden dangers found in many margarines and processed snacks.
- Eat more fibre. Soluble fibre binds with cholesterol making it easier for your body to dispose of it.
- Eat five portions of fruit and veg. The more colourful the better.
- Cut down on your salt and sodium intake. Flavour