

# Cardiovascular Health

## Australia's cardiovascular health

Cardiovascular disease (CVD) is a term used to describe all diseases of the heart and blood vessels. Coronary heart disease (which includes heart attacks and angina) and stroke are common forms of CVD. In Australia, coronary heart disease is the leading cause of death, accounting for 19% of all deaths while stroke accounts for 9% of all deaths. With an 18% increase in the prevalence of CVD over the last decade, preventing CVD is an important national health priority.

A healthy lifestyle plays an important role in the prevention and management of CVD. The following information outlines the risk factors for CVD, the measures we can take to manage CVD and the role of dairy foods in your heart healthy lifestyle plan.

## Risk factors for CVD

The cause of most CVD is the gradual narrowing or blockage of blood vessels that supply blood to the heart or brain. This process is called atherosclerosis and is due to the build-up of fatty deposits on the lining of blood vessels.

There are a number of factors that influence the likelihood of developing CVD such as heart disease or stroke, many of which are able to be modified by lifestyle changes. These include:

- high blood cholesterol
- high blood pressure
- smoking
- physical inactivity
- being overweight
- excessive alcohol consumption
- high blood sugar levels (or diabetes).

A family history, increasing age and being male also increases the risk of developing CVD.

## What is blood cholesterol and blood pressure?

Cholesterol is a fatty wax like substance found within the body that plays a major role in the body's normal functioning. However, the wrong balance of cholesterol in the blood can increase the risk of atherosclerosis and CVD.

There are two main types of cholesterol in the blood:

- **LDL (Low Density Lipoprotein) cholesterol** makes up the majority of blood cholesterol and is often termed the 'bad' cholesterol. LDL cholesterol is the type that clogs up blood vessels. The target level for LDL cholesterol is less than 2.5mmol/L.
- **HDL (High Density Lipoprotein) cholesterol** or 'good' cholesterol actually helps protect against CVD by unclogging the blood vessels. The target level for HDL cholesterol is more than 1mmol/L.

Any lowering of LDL cholesterol and any raising of HDL cholesterol levels is beneficial.

Blood pressure is the pressure of blood in the arteries as it is being pumped around the body by the heart. Higher than normal blood pressure is called hypertension and is a key risk factor for both heart disease and stroke. As an approximate guide, normal blood pressure is less than 120/80mm Hg.

## A lifestyle for good cardiovascular health

Adopting a healthy lifestyle is the best way to reduce your risk of developing CVD. And it is never too early or too late to begin. Making lifestyle changes can also help prevent existing CVD from getting worse. The key steps to reducing the risk factors over which we have some control include:

- healthy eating
- regular physical activity (aim for 30 minutes of moderate-intensity activity on most days of the week)
- giving up smoking
- maintaining a healthy weight.



For good cardiovascular health, try the following healthy eating recommendations:

- select lean meat (trimmed of fat) and poultry (without skin)
- base your meals around vegetables (including legumes) and grain-based foods such as pasta, noodles, rice and bread
- choose low or reduced fat dairy foods, aiming for 3 serves every day
- try to include fish (fresh or canned) at least twice a week
- try to limit fried takeaway foods, cakes, pastries, crisps and biscuits
- use a variety of monounsaturated and polyunsaturated oils for cooking
- for snacks choose plain, unsalted nuts and fruit
- use products containing plant sterols, for example, margarines, low fat milk and yogurt
- try to limit your intake of salt and avoid excess alcohol.

### **Try a DASH of healthy eating**

A major study has discovered that blood pressure and cholesterol can be lowered by following an eating plan called the Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension (DASH) plan. The DASH eating plan is a low fat diet containing plenty of fruits, vegetables and 3 serves of mainly low fat dairy foods. In fact, in people with slightly raised blood pressure, the DASH plan lowered blood pressure to a level similar to that expected from medication! Importantly, blood pressure can begin to fall after just two weeks on this eating plan. The DASH eating plan was also found to lower total cholesterol by 7% and LDL cholesterol by 9%.

### **Dairy foods and cardiovascular health**

The Australian Dietary Guidelines highlight that dairy foods are a key component of a healthy, balanced diet. The Heart Foundation also recognises the importance of including dairy foods in the dietary management of high blood cholesterol and

blood pressure, recommending consumption of low or reduced fat milk and yogurt.

### **Dairy linked to better cardiovascular health**

Recently there has been a great deal of research that has specifically highlighted the beneficial role dairy foods play in the management of CVD and associated risk factors.

Scientists have found that people who regularly consume dairy foods tend to have better cardiovascular health than those who don't. One study found that overweight adults who regularly consumed dairy foods (both regular and reduced fat) had a lower risk of a number of risk factors for CVD.

In addition, new research suggests that regular milk drinkers have a reduced risk of heart disease and stroke. The research involved 10 major studies exploring milk drinking and cardiovascular health. Almost 400,000 men and women from a range of countries were followed for between 8 and 28 years.

The research found that people with the highest daily milk consumption had a 16% lower risk of heart disease or stroke when compared with those with the lowest milk intakes. Interestingly, the majority of the milk consumed was regular-fat milk.

### **Enjoy 3 serves of dairy every day**

Dairy foods such as milk, yogurt and cheese are important sources of over 10 essential nutrients including vitamins A and B<sub>12</sub>, calcium, carbohydrate, magnesium, phosphorus, potassium, protein, riboflavin and zinc. For good health, including cardiovascular health, make sure you get your 3 serves\* of dairy foods every day. A serve of dairy could include 1 glass (250mL) of milk, 1 tub (200g) of yogurt or 2 slices (40g) of cheese. With the wide variety of dairy foods available there is a choice to suit everyone as part of a heart healthy lifestyle.

\*3 serves of dairy provides approximately 100% of the average recommended dietary intake for calcium.



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