

Looking after your heart

Looking after your heart is important, especially when you have diabetes. People living with diabetes are two to four times more likely to develop heart (cardiovascular) disease, including heart attacks.

The main cause of heart disease is atherosclerosis, a condition that is more common – and develops at a younger age – in people with diabetes.

If you have atherosclerosis, plaque (made up of cholesterol and other fats) builds up in the arteries, causing the blood vessels to narrow. This can lead to reduced or blocked blood supply to the vessels that provide blood to the heart and brain, thereby increasing the risk of heart attack and stroke. Blood fats (cholesterol and triglycerides) above the target range are more common in people with diabetes.

How do you know if you have heart disease?

Often, people don't know they have heart disease until they develop symptoms. These symptoms are listed below.

- » Chest pain or heaviness
- » Shortness of breath
- » Dizziness or faintness
- » Arm or jaw discomfort
- » Weakness
- » Nausea.

These symptoms require urgent medical attention.

If you have nerve damage, you may not notice many - or any - symptoms of heart disease.

What is your risk of developing heart disease?

Your doctor can assess your risk of developing heart disease. The risk is higher if you:

- » have high blood pressure or cholesterol
- » are above the healthy weight range or carry extra weight around your waist
- » are a smoker
- » have a family history of heart disease.

However, there are ways to help reduce your risk of heart disease.



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Be physically active

Regular physical activity can lower blood pressure and help reduce the risk of a heart attack and stroke. Aim to do at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity on most, if not all, days of the week. Check with your doctor before starting a physical activity program.

Make healthy food choices

Choose a wide variety of foods, including fruit, vegetables, wholegrains, lean meats and lowfat dairy foods. Include high-fibre, low glycaemic index (GI) carbohydrate foods. To reduce your risk of heart disease, it's also important to limit foods high in saturated fat and salt (sodium). A dietitian can help with the best food choices to reduce your risk of heart disease.

Keep blood fats (cholesterol and triglycerides) in the target range

Keeping cholesterol and triglyceride levels in the target range will reduce your risk of heart disease.

- » Total cholesterol of less than 4mmol/L
- » LDL ('bad') cholesterol of less than 2mmol/L
- » HDL ('good') cholesterol of 1mmol/L or above
- » Triglycerides of less than 2mmol/L.

Your doctor may prescribe medications that can help manage your cholesterol and other risk factors for cardiovascular disease.

Manage high blood pressure

High blood pressure is common in people with diabetes, and it can more than double the risk of heart disease. Weight loss (if needed) and regular physical activity can help lower your blood pressure.

As a general guide the blood pressure target for people with diabetes is 130/80 or lower. If you have existing cardiovascular or kidney disease, your doctor will advise you on a blood pressure target to meet your individual health needs.

Your doctor may prescribe medications that can help manage your blood pressure and reduce the risk of heart disease and other diabetes-related complications.

If your weight is above the healthy weight range, try to lose weight

Carrying excess weight, especially around your waist, is a major risk factor for heart disease and is strongly linked to type 2 diabetes. The recommended waist measurement is less than 94cm for men and less than 80cm for women. Losing as little as 5-10% of your weight (for example, 5-10kg for a 100kg person) can reduce your risk of heart disease.

Don't smoke – if you do smoke try and quit

Smoking is a major risk factor for sudden cardiac death, and smokers who have diabetes have double the risk of heart disease. If you feel you can't give up smoking on your own, ask for help – talk to your doctor or call the Quitline on 137 848.



More information

For more information about heart disease, go to www.heartfoundation.org.au

The NDSS and you

A wide range of services and support is available through the NDSS to help you manage your diabetes. This includes information on diabetes management through the NDSS Helpline and website. The products, services and education programs available can help you stay on top of your diabetes.

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