

to reduce your risk of heart  
and circulatory diseases



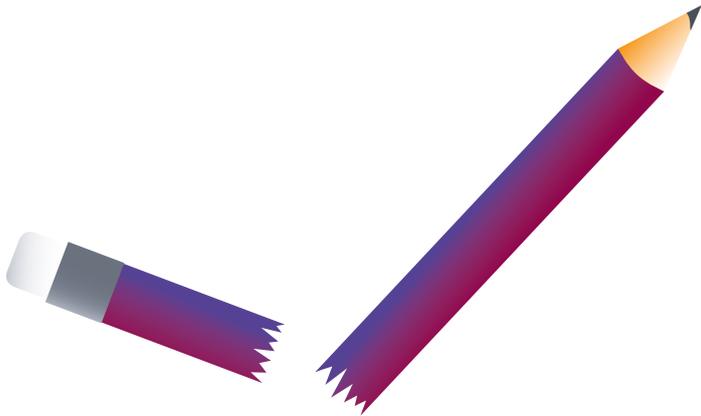
## What is stress?

**This leaflet is for people who may be affected by stress. If you've been feeling under pressure lately, it could affect your health. But there are small changes you can do to make things better.**

Stress is a feeling of being overwhelmed or under pressure. Maybe you feel there aren't enough hours in the day, other people are asking too much of you, or that life's all a bit too much right now. You may be feeling anxious and panicked. It's normal to feel like that sometimes. But if you are feeling like this more and more over time and you are struggling to cope, it's time to make some changes.

**Stress alone won't give you heart and circulatory disease. But it is linked to unhealthy habits that can increase your risk.**

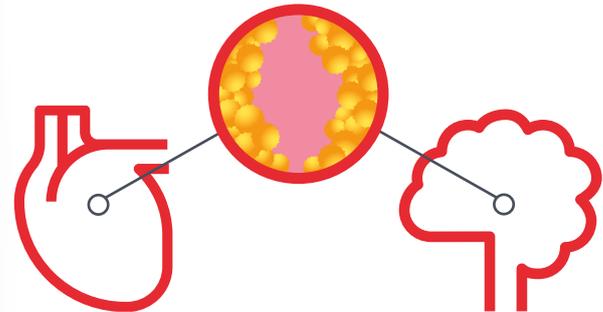
Feeling overwhelmed can mean you may make choices that put your heart health at risk. You might be eating more than usual, choosing unhealthy foods, smoking, or drinking more alcohol than is healthy. If you or the people close to you have noticed you are making unhealthy choices or seem under pressure, you should take action.



## What are heart and circulatory diseases?

**Heart and circulatory diseases kill 1 in 4 people in the UK. Leading an unhealthy lifestyle can increase your risk.**

Fatty material can build up in your arteries (the vessels that carry blood to your organs). This can increase the risk of heart and circulatory diseases. If the arteries that carry blood to your heart get damaged and clogged, it can lead to a heart attack. If this happens in the arteries that carry blood to your brain it can lead to a stroke.



Artery in the heart getting blocked

Artery in the brain getting blocked

**You're much more likely to get heart and circulatory diseases if you:**

- Smoke
- Drink too much alcohol
- Are overweight
- Aren't physically active
- Have high blood pressure
- Have high cholesterol
- Have diabetes.

**“When it comes to stress, it all depends on your coping mechanisms. Some people try to cope by smoking, drinking too much alcohol and overeating. All of these increase your risk of heart and circulatory disease.”**

Chris Allen,  
Senior Cardiac Nurse, BHF

# Stress and heart and circulatory diseases

**Stress can lead you to habits that aren't good news for your heart health. What may seem like small actions can add up to long-term health problems.**

When people are stressed they often turn to unhealthy habits like smoking, eating comfort food that's often high in fat or sugar, drinking too much alcohol or not being physically active. In the moment, these things can make us feel relaxed. But if we do too much of them in the long run, it can harm our heart health. Think about small, healthy changes you can make over time, like eating your five-a-day or going for a 30-minute walk to reduce the feeling of stress.

Taking care of yourself by eating well, being active, getting enough sleep and quitting bad habits will help you feel better and protect your heart.

Unhealthy habits could lead to:

**High cholesterol:** If you eat too many foods high in saturated fat, this can lead to high cholesterol. Cholesterol is a fatty substance in your body that can get stuck to the walls of your arteries. It clogs or damages the arteries, increasing your risk of having a heart attack or stroke.

**High blood pressure:** Feeling stressed may make your blood pressure increase for a short time. This is normal. But behaviours linked to stress like overeating, eating too much salt, drinking too much alcohol and not moving around enough can lead to long-term high blood pressure. This can damage your heart, major organs and arteries over time.

**Type 2 diabetes:** A poor diet and not enough physical activity increases your risk of developing type 2 diabetes in the future.

## Inside your arteries

The diagram shows a cross-section of an artery. The lumen is the central pink area. The artery wall is on the right. A large, irregular yellow mass is attached to the inner wall, labeled 'Fatty build-up'. Numerous yellow, spiky spheres representing cholesterol particles are scattered throughout the lumen. A label 'Artery wall' points to the right boundary of the pink area.  
Fatty build-up

Artery wall

# How do I know if I'm stressed?

**Everyone feels stressed at times. But learn to spot when it's getting out of control.**

Our minds and bodies have ways of letting us know if stress is getting to us. It might be a physical sensation or it might be more of an emotional state that you can't shake.

Watch out for these signs:

## Physical signs of stress

- Heart beating fast (palpitations)
- Dry mouth
- Headaches, odd pains, feeling dizzy or sick
- Tiredness or trouble sleeping
- Sudden weight loss or gain, frequent bad temper and lack of patience

## Emotional signs of stress

- Upset
- Feeling scared, anxious, panicked or worried often
- Easily angry or tearful
- Feeling alone or hopeless
- Feeling numb and uninterested in life.



If you have been working too hard, suffered a bereavement, have money worries or are experiencing anything else that's really stressful, you may find yourself withdrawing from friends and family.

If these signs continue over a long period of time, you may start to develop anxiety or depression. You need to speak to your doctor sooner rather than later.

**For more information on improving your mental health, go to [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)**

# What causes stress?

Recognising and understanding what's making you stressed is the first step to reducing your stress levels.

## Common sources of stress



Work



Relationships  
& family life



Loneliness



Money  
concerns



Major life  
events



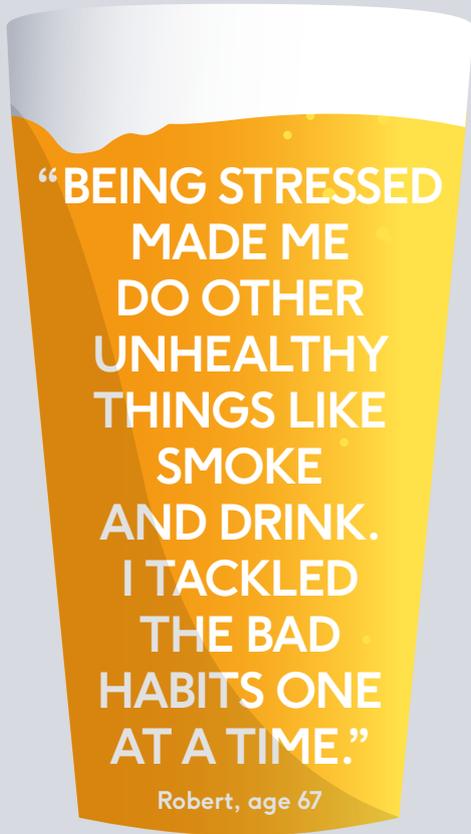
Change

**Pay attention to points in the day when you feel stressed. Over time you are likely to spot a pattern.**

Your environment, who you're with and what you're doing when you feel stressed will help shed light on what's making you feel that way. You will also notice times when you don't feel stressed and learn to make more of them.

For example, if the morning commute makes you feel stressed but walking the dog makes you feel relaxed, try to build a short walk into your journey to work each morning.

**Think about what you can change, and what you can't. Often you can't change what is happening, but you might be able to think of ways to make things easier.**



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AT A TIME.”**

Robert, age 67

## **What's stopping you?**

A lot of the time stress feels like something you can't do anything about. Many stressful situations, like jobs, family commitments, illness or loss of a loved one are unavoidable. But you can help to improve your health by taking control of the way you react to what's going on.

**“I thought I didn't have a choice. I had to work 12 hours a day flat out. I now realise that if I take a breather at lunch time and get up from my desk now and then, the world doesn't fall apart.”**

Richard, age 69

The best time to make even small changes is always now. It's easy to think that you'll do it later, but if something is affecting your health right now, then you need to take action. There will never be a perfect time. If you're not at your best, you're not giving your family, friends and co-workers your best either. It's time to put yourself first.

**Start small.**  
**Find 10 minutes**  
**just for you.**



## Where to start

Once you know what's making you stressed, you can start tackling it in a few different ways. This will stop you making choices that increase your risk of heart and circulatory diseases.

### Lifestyle

**If you smoke try to cut down or quit.** It's the single most important thing you can do for your health.

**Try not to binge drink** – that's more than 8 units in a single session for men, and 6 units for women.

**Try to eat a healthy, balanced diet** with plenty of fruit and vegetables and cut down on too many sugary or fatty treats.

**Take every chance to get up and move.** Try to fit in a short walk every day at the very least.

**Get plenty of rest** and try to take some time out for yourself.

**Drink plenty of water.** Staying hydrated will help you feel less irritable.

**The only things you can change are your actions. Focus on things you can control.**

## Mindset

**Don't be afraid to ask for help.** Sometimes you need to put yourself first.

**Try to only focus** on the things you can change.

**Put yourself first.** Don't be afraid to pause, relax or say no to people.

**Focus on the positives in your life** and the things you are glad of.

**Try some relaxation exercises,** like yoga, meditation and breathing techniques.

## Support

**Let people in your life know** how you're feeling. Spend time with those who matter most.

**Take up a hobby** or try something new to build your confidence.

**Don't keep things to yourself.** Talk about your problems.

**There are services available** such as talking therapies, including cognitive behavioral therapy.

**If you don't think you can cope** with the level of stress in your life, talk to your doctor.

Heart transplants. Clot busting drugs. Pacemakers. Breakthroughs born from visionary medical research. Research you fund with your donations.

Heart and circulatory diseases kill 1 in 4 people in the UK. They cause heartbreak on every street. But if research can invent machines to restart hearts, fix arteries in newborn babies, build tiny devices to correct heartbeats, and give someone a heart they weren't born with – imagine what's next.

We fund research into all heart and circulatory diseases and their risk factors. Heart attacks, heart failure, stroke, vascular dementia, diabetes and many more. All connected, all under our microscope. Our research is the promise of future prevention, cures and treatments.

The promise to protect the people we love. Our children. Our parents. Our brothers. Our sisters. Our grandparents. Our closest friends.

You and the British Heart Foundation. Together, we will beat heartbreak forever.

## Beat heartbreak forever.

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