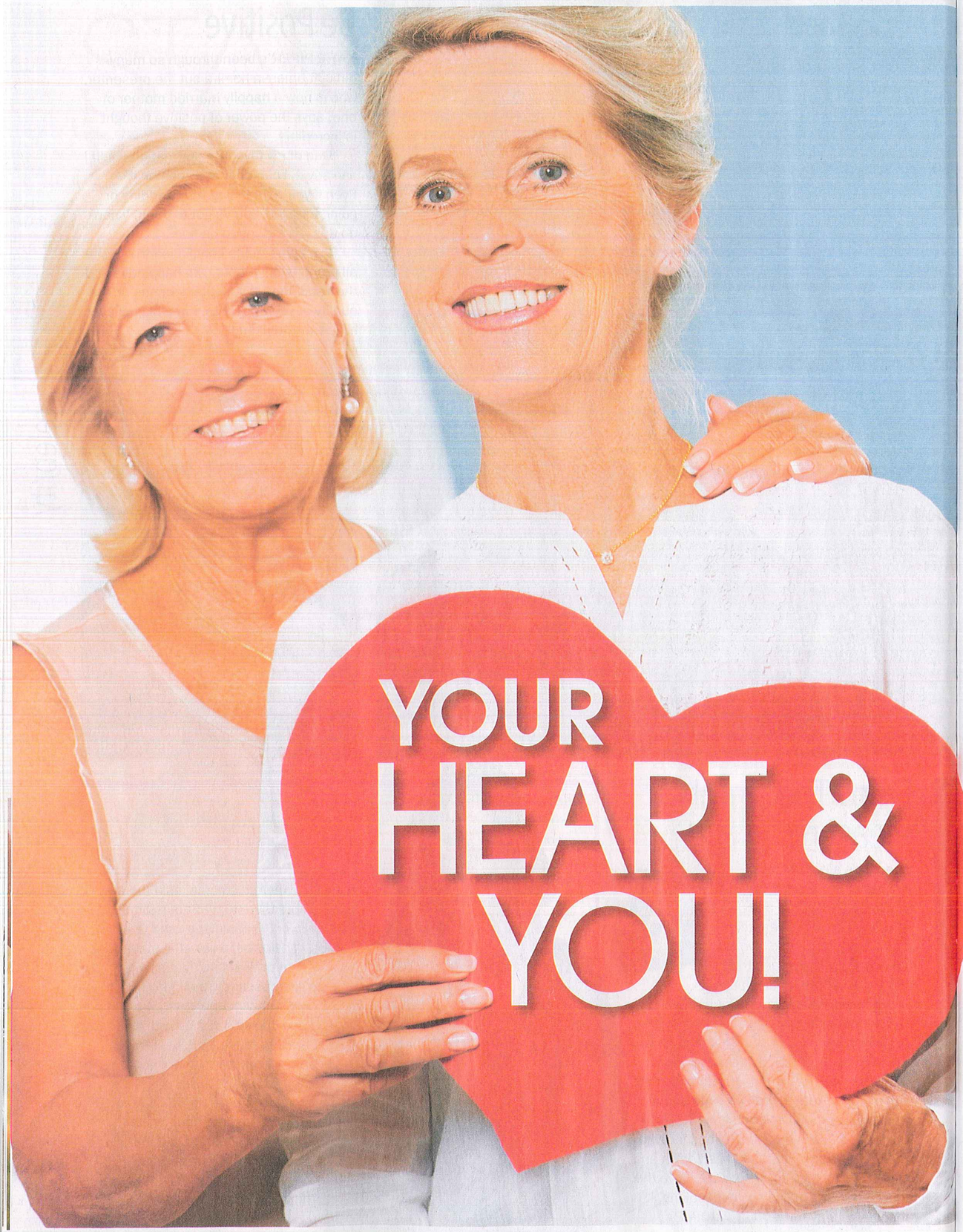


5 fact-filled pages of heart health information

The circulatory system moves blood from the heart all around the body. It delivers nutrients to the brain, lungs, legs and every other part, moving toxins out. Exercise is one of the best ways to support our circulatory system.

"We don't exercise as much as we should," says Dr Sanjay Gupta, a York consultant cardiologist and heart health video blogger (www.youtube.com/yorkcardiology). "Lack of exercise is bad for our circulatory system – but so is extreme exercise."

Worried my attempts to fit in four trips to the gym, a four-mile bike ride and a yoga class might be extreme, I asked what he meant.

"An ultramarathon in ten days," he suggested.

I need not worry.

"If we're feeling sick and start eating good healthy foods, it helps us feel better immediately. If we're coming down with 'flu and go for a gentle run, we can shake it off. There are many studies around the anti-inflammatory benefits of exercise.

"Sleep is incredibly important, too. The majority of people don't sleep as much as they should. One in five have sleep apnoea and one in two have insomnia."

He explains that it's not just the two hours' sleep that night, but the cumulative effects on the heart and blood vessels over 20 years.

To support your circulatory system, "get physically active," says Dr Toni Hazell, a GP in North London (www.tonihazell.com). "There is evidence that lack of physical activity is a risk factor for various diseases, including cancer. This risk is independent of being overweight. Thin but unfit does not equal healthy. Exercise is also known to be useful for mild depression." (See Stress And You below)

"I'm always amazed by how many people still smoke.

A little exercise every day is ideal

If you do, seek help to quit," adds Dr Hazell. "You're more likely to succeed with a smoking cessation clinic than going cold turkey on your own or buying over-the-counter nicotine replacements."

"Getting fitter increases the capillaries in your heart," says David Stead, personal trainer and owner at DS Fitness Experience (www.dsfitnessexperience.com). "This reduces your resting heart rate, making everyday tasks much easier."

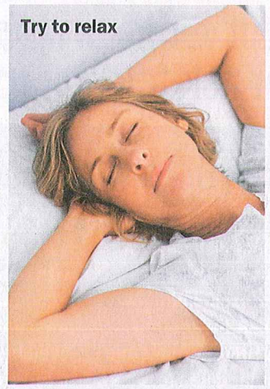
"Exercise causes the muscles of your heart to get bigger and stronger," says Julia Buckley, author of *The Fat Burn Revolution* (Bloomsbury Sport, 2014) who also runs an online gym (www.juliabuckleyfitness.com).

"It also causes muscles and blood vessels to grow as well as increasing the size and number of red blood cells, so your body can circulate more blood, nutrients and oxygen as a result of exercise."

As well as cardio exercise that gets the blood and heart pumping, yoga is brilliant for helping the circulatory system. Yoga inversions (see overleaf) are especially beneficial as gravity gives the venous system, which carries blood back to the heart, a break for a few minutes. Because inversions carry more blood to extremities, they can even speed up healing in these areas.

With so many exercise options to choose from, shake off bad memories from school PE classes and opt for something you'll enjoy. Try the challenge of a run. Perhaps you'd prefer the social aspect of netball or other team sports. Swimming or cycling? Even walking regularly is beneficial.

The risk of inactivity is independent of weight – thin but unfit is not healthy


Try to relax

STRESS AND YOU

When our stress response is triggered, the blood stream is flooded with stress hormones. If we don't move – honouring the body's natural fight/flight impulse – these can have an impact throughout the circulatory system.

"Stress has a huge impact on the circulatory system," says Dr Gupta. "More than smoking, more than alcohol, stress is hugely inflammatory. We live in a world where people have to be more productive and this causes more stress.

"At some point, that's going to become incredibly damaging to the circulatory system. It's the cumulative effect on the blood vessels. Cholesterol gets trapped and then has an effect on vital organs."

A deeper breath and longer exhalation helps calm the nervous system. Via the vagus nerve, this calms the whole body. Breathe in for 1 and out for 2, or in for 2 and out for 4 for a longer exhalation.

WORDS: EVE MENEZES CUNNINGHAM PICTURES: ISTOCKPHOTO, REX/SHUTTERSTOCK, ALAMY, SUPERSTOCK, SEASONS AGENCY/MOHR IMAGES

Continued overleaf

CUT THE RISK OF A HEART ATTACK

Recognise the symptoms and prevent long term damage

Up until relatively recently, most of what we knew about heart attacks came from studies on men. In recent decades, we've learned that symptoms for women can actually be very different.

While men typically experience pressure and pain in the chest and a tight feeling, women's symptoms include back pain, nausea, dizziness, fatigue, shortness of breath, disturbed sleep and even abdominal pain. Far fewer women report chest pain. Some women don't even know they've had a heart attack until they're later told by a doctor.

Emotional stress is more likely to cause them in women, while physical stress is more likely for men.

"Most people know about central crushing chest pain as a feature," says Dr Hazell. "But it can feel like it comes from the stomach, so be wary of an unusually bad attack of indigestion. Feeling sweaty, nauseous or dizzy with it is a bad sign, as is pain that goes to the jaw or left arm.

"Those with diabetes, particularly with diabetic nerve damage, can have a silent heart attack which, as the name suggests, doesn't have symptoms such as chest pain or shortness of breath. It can sometimes make itself known after the event with things like unexplained new fatigue or discomfort in the neck, chest or back.

"There is some evidence for an increase in the rates of heart attacks in the first year after retirement, levelling off after that. There are multiple factors to consider, like how much you enjoyed your job, what you plan to do with your retirement, other health and financial issues.

"This shouldn't stop people retiring. Stepping down gradually and finding things to fill your day are sensible things to do so that retirement isn't too much of a shock to the system."

Whether you've been running on empty to meet a big deadline or you're gearing up for a much-needed holiday – or retirement – think about how you might do your future self a favour and slow down a little.

Emotional rather than physical stress is a bigger risk factor for women

Quit smoking – it's the best thing you can do!

Effects Of The Menopause

At one point, it was thought that giving HRT reduced the risk of developing cardiovascular disease," says Dr Hazell. "We now know that this doesn't work. However nor does HRT increase the risk of cardiovascular disease, as a previous study, now discredited, suggested.

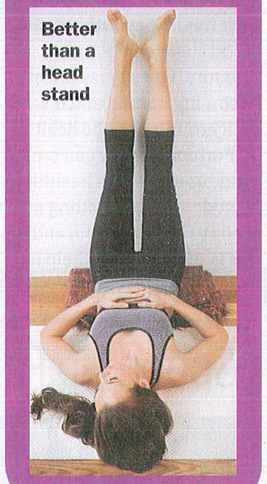
"Risk rises with age so post-menopausal women are at higher risk anyway, but managing the usual risk factors – smoking, blood pressure, weight, cholesterol levels – is the most important thing to do. HRT should only be started for the symptoms of the menopause, not to protect the heart."

Menopause and hormonal changes as we get older affect the circulatory system in many ways. Medical herbalist Kathie Bishop (www.intothewylde.com) helps women with related issues including inflammation, cholesterol, blood pressure, heart health, leg swelling, ways to keep the brain healthy and avoiding varicose veins in the legs.

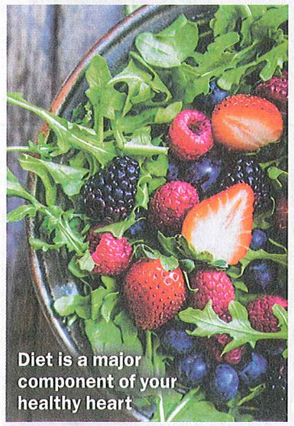
"Some key and easily available herbs can be brought into your everyday life. Hawthorn supports healthy heart function. Ginkgo biloba improves blood flow to the arteries leading to the brain. Horse chestnut, when applied topically in a gel form (never take internally without advice from a qualified practitioner) can help tone and prevent early stages of varicose veins. See a qualified practitioner to assess your unique needs."

TRY THIS!

Legs Up Wall is safe to hold for long enough to get many of the benefits of inversions with less risk than a headstand. Bringing your buttocks as close to the wall as possible, gently swing your legs around and bring them up against the wall. Notice your breath and the support of the wall and floor. Rest poses help us retrain the nervous system for relaxation and benefits the circulatory system.



Better than a head stand



Diet is a major component of your healthy heart

Stay Healthy When You Are Older

Dr Gupta explains that nutrition has a big impact on the circulatory system and cardiovascular health.

"Healthy organic foods that are not processed are extremely good for our circulatory systems. Sadly, the majority of the food we eat these days is adulterated. This has led to an increase in gastric issues. In addition to the foods and chemicals that are inflammatory, with meat we don't know what the animals have been fed. This leads to low grade inflammation. The body will react but it's under our radar for years. It affects our blood vessels; the hormones released cause the blood vessels to harden."

Our motivation depends on how badly affected we are. Dr Dean Ornish's Reverse Heart Disease Diet is quite dramatic – mostly raw vegetables. Yet, as he proved with heart patients deemed too ill for surgery and medical intervention, we can do an enormous amount of good for our bodies by eating better.

More recently, his Spectrum Diet shares the benefits of healthy foods, encouraging us to eat more of those – although nothing is off limits.

Continued overleaf

REDUCE YOUR RISK OF STROKE

Learning how to control stress could be the best thing you do

"Controlling blood pressure is key," says Dr Hazell. "Get it checked at 40 and every 5 years if normal.

"Stay slim. I have several patients who were obese with diabetes and hypertension and on multiple medications. They lost weight and are now off all their medicines with normal blood sugar and blood pressure. Obesity is almost becoming normal and it's very dangerous for public health."

Fortunately, we can create a virtuous cycle with healthier lifestyle choices. Getting active tends to lift our mood, and this is more likely to help us feel motivated to make better choices around food.

Walking or exercising with friends not only makes it more fun but helps us stay more motivated and more likely to keep it up for longer.

"Do what you enjoy," advises David Stead. "And you'll get better results."

Meditation and yoga form part of Dr Ornish's programme. We don't have to set ourselves impossible standards. Even mindful breathing for one minute in the morning, mid afternoon, and before bed, can have a positive impact on stress levels and the circulatory system. Find practices that you enjoy so you're more likely to use them.

Try a few minutes' mindfulness each day

Speed Up For Better Health

Fitness guru Julia Buckley shares her tips and advice on how to fit more exercise into your daily routine

Set realistic goals

SLOW/LOW

If you're unfit, set realistic goals over an equally realistic period. "You can achieve noticeable progress with the right plan," says Julia. "There's nothing more motivating than seeing real changes and hitting your goals."

Go HIIT

MEDIUM

"Research has proven that HIIT (High Intensity Interval Training) burns more calories compared to steady state exercise," says Julia. "It results in accelerated fitness gains without knocking yourself out with boring workouts."

Share that good feeling

FAST/HIGH

If you're already fit, look at the small things you can improve. "Give yourself a pat on the back and share your passion," says Julia. "We need to be open about how good exercise makes us feel. It's not some kind of horrible torture."