

JUST
BEAT IT

Pump up your power centre

What you need to
do to protect your
precious ticker,
starting now

BY MALIA JACOBSON

Talk about overworked and under-appreciated: the heart fuels your limbs, brain and organs with oxygen and nutrient-rich blood to get you through blistering workouts or another crazy work day.

Yet, when it comes to heart disease, most of us still think it only affects old blokes. Time to ditch that stereotype once and for all. Twenty-nine Australian women die from heart disease every day, making it our number one killer, figures from the Heart Foundation show. And this often-silent illness can start as early as your teenage years. Get this: your lifetime risk for heart disease is four times that of breast cancer.

You're probably aware that the symptoms of heart attack are different between the sexes, but may not know that only one in three women will have a textbook heart attack. Professor Diane Fatkin from the Victor Chang Cardiac Research Institute says the typical symptoms that men get, such as pressure and tightness in the chest,





sweating and shortness of breath, may be absent if a woman has a heart attack. We're more likely to feel extreme tiredness, nausea, palpitations and shortness of breath. "If you get these symptoms and they last 20 minutes or more, seek medical attention," Fatkin says.

Here's what you need to know: 90 per cent of us have at least one modifiable risk factor (check the answers from *WH* health expert Dr Ginni Mansberg, at right, for a few). And it's not just hardening of the arteries to consider; there's also heart muscle disease, heart rhythm disorders and congenital muscle defects. "If your sister, brother, mother or father has heart issues, then get screened," says Fatkin. Smart plan.

So, it's time to give your pulsating powerhouse some love. Try making Heart Week (May 3-9) the kickstart you need.

My sister swears her vegan diet prevents heart disease. True?

Most doctors believe there is some evidence of the benefits of a vegetarian diet, but that doesn't extend to vegan. Those on restricted diets may suffer nutrition gaps; vegans, for example, may lack B12, a key vitamin for blood and nerve cells that's found mostly in animal products, such as meat, eggs and dairy. A vegan is at high risk of calcium and B12 deficiency, which can increase the risk of heart disease. Alternative milks often have added calcium but not B12, so vegans will need supplements.

I'm a workaholic and an adrenaline junkie. How bad is that for my heart?

Being aware of your stress levels can make you a high achiever. But chronic elevated levels of stress hormones cortisol and adrenaline can raise blood pressure. Short-term bursts are fine, but long term, adrenaline can lead to depression and metabolism changes, and cortisol to interrupted sleep and mental health risks. Stress isn't the problem; it's your ability to cope. If you feel you're not, dial down your intensity and see a doctor for management techniques.

— YOU'RE SO VEIN

KNOW YOUR HEART

Get comfy with doctor-speak

Cardiovascular disease
Heart and blood vessel conditions, including coronary artery disease, heart failure and heart valve problems.

Cholesterol
A waxy fat created in the liver, circulated via the bloodstream. Friendly high-density lipoprotein (HDL) is the heart-protecting 'good' cholesterol; high levels of bad-boy low-density lipoprotein (LDL) can lead to the sticky plaque deposits that cause arterial blockages.

Metabolic syndrome
A nasty cluster of conditions (high blood pressure, excess abdominal fat, elevated blood sugar and abnormal cholesterol) that can send you spiralling towards heart disease. It's often reversible through diet and exercise modifications.

Triglycerides
Usually bundled with cholesterol – levels are checked at the same time – these make up about 95 per cent of all dietary fats. Regular overeating leading to obesity causes raised levels, which is linked with increased risk of diabetes and heart disease.

Heart this, not that

The science-backed stuff that can help (or harm) your ticker

HEART THIS



Optimism

Happy news! A cheery disposition has been linked to a lower risk for heart disease research published in *JAMA Psychiatry* shows. A sunny temperament may serve as a buffer against heart health-sapping stress.



Magnesium

The mineral plays a crucial role in helping your heart beat, and an extra 200mg daily could slash your cardiac disease risk by 22 per cent, research from the Harvard School of Public Health shows. Load your plate with magnesium superstars like whole grains, nuts and leafy greens.



Tea

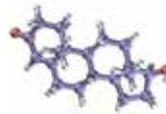
Both green and black varieties may help reduce LDL cholesterol. Having a regular cuppa can also improve artery function.



Happy hour

Yup, an alcoholic bevvie of any kind (not just red wine) may reduce your risk for developing heart failure by 16 per cent, a new study published in the *European Heart Journal* shows. But keep it to one or less per day, as more than that has the opposite effect.

NOT THAT



Hormonal havoc

Heart attack risk can be up to seven times higher in women with out-of-whack oestrogen or testosterone levels. If you notice irregular periods, sudden weight gain or excess body hair, see your doc, ASAP.



Anger

Sure, everyone has the right to get pissed off from time to time, but chances of a heart attack increase nearly five-fold in the two hours after a rage-fuelled outburst: adrenaline and cortisol squeeze the arteries, shows research published in the *European Heart Journal*.



Chronic noise

Living near the airport or always being around loud traffic could raise your risk. Experts believe noise pollution can cause stress, which increases blood pressure.



Air pollution

The World Health Organisation estimates that cleaning up smog could prevent nearly 8000 heart failure hospitalisations each year. Breathing pollution contributes to hardening of the arteries. You can reduce risk by avoiding big roads.

PROTECT YOUR HEART LIKE A PRO



WH stress less expert Dr Suzy Green

"Like all muscles, the heart becomes stronger as a result of exercise. Every year I set myself a fitness BHAG (big hairy audacious goal). This year it's to run a half marathon."



Cardiologist Dr Fiona Foo

"I'm pescetarian, so eat plenty of fish, vegetables, fruit and good nuts (almonds and walnuts). I avoid sugar, high sat fat and processed foods and have a green smoothie every morning with antioxidant and anti-inflammatory superfoods."



Cardiologist Dr Melissa Doohan

"Every week I go to a three-hour-long painting class where we all have to turn off our phones. It's where I can relax."

I think I felt my heart skip a beat, literally. Is that even possible?

Yes, it's common. Your heart has a conducting electric system that can malfunction, like when your computer freezes. It doesn't mean it has a virus; it just needs to reboot. See your doc if it's accompanied by light-headedness or dizziness or is happening regularly (to you that is, not your computer).

Both my grandmas had heart attacks in their sixties. Am I doomed?

Heart disease can be genetic, but when it comes to family history doctors look first at your immediate family – parents and siblings. Concerning family history or not, it's all about managing risk factors – don't smoke, do some exercise, eat a balanced diet, don't drink too much and stay in your healthy weight range. **WH**