

Be active for your heart's sake!

There are several risk factors that can increase the risk of developing coronary heart disease (CHD) and thus the chance of a heart attack. Fortunately most of these risk factors may be eliminated or at least reduced.

Major risk factors include:

- High blood cholesterol
- High blood pressure
- Diabetes
- Cigarette smoking
- Inactivity
- Overweight

On average, each one of these factors doubles the chances of developing heart disease. The more risks you have – the greater your risk!

Over the past 40 years, evidence has accumulated on the role of physical activity in preventing and treating coronary heart disease (CHD). The findings are consistent and show that inactive people have about twice the risk of developing or dying from CHD, compared to active people.

In South Africa in 2003, 62% of men and 48% of women 15 years or older followed a sedentary lifestyle. So did 33% of South African adolescent boys and 42% of girls.

It is estimated that 3% of men and 4% of women aged 30 years or older who die, die as a result lack of physical activity.

Consequently in 2000, 20 men and 26 women, 30 years or older, died per day because of a lack of regular physical activity.

Physical activity not only halves the risk of CHD, but also carries similar benefits in the prevention of stroke and type 2 diabetes. There are also reduced rates of hip and vertebral fracture, colon cancer, as well as beneficial effects on anxiety and depression and a reduction in cognitive decline with age.

Exercise has a huge impact on our bodies which includes:

- Improvement in myocardial contraction*
- An increase in the stroke volume at rest and during exercise resulting in higher cardiac output*
- Heart rate is decreased at rest*
- Coronary arteries are able to dilate more – resulting in decreased blood pressure
- There is reduced platelet aggregation – resulting in decreased risk for clot formation
- Improved lipid profile – higher HDL levels (good cholesterol) and lower LDL levels (bad cholesterol)
- Improved activity of lipoprotein lipase – increased fat burning. Exercise helps people lose unwanted kilos and to maintain their ideal weight.
- Improved sensitivity of liver, skeletal muscle and adipose tissue to the actions of insulin – improved blood glucose levels. You also have less chance of developing diabetes if you are of normal, healthy weight. Diabetics also find that exercise cuts down on their insulin requirements.

* These are the benefits of a well conditioned heart, meaning that in 1 minute, with 45 - 50 beats, the heart in a fit and healthy person pumps the same amount of blood as the average person's heart pumps in 70 - 75 beats.

Exercise is easy to incorporate into our daily lives and the aim is to choose exercises that you enjoy. The weather is not an excuse either, try indoor aerobic exercises such as jumping rope, using a hula hoop, or exercises that improve muscle strength and flexibility such as yoga and pilates.

For more information on general heart health contact the Heart Mark Diet Line on 0860 223 222, email heart@heartfoundation.co.za or visit www.heartfoundation.co.za.