

- Health

Are you the owner of a healthy heart?

February is National Heart Month – and despite pandemic restrictions, there is still a lot we can do to look after tickers, says ABI JACKSON

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LOCKDOWN living might be monotonous and limited, but when it comes to looking after our heart health, there's actually a surprising amount we can still do. The pandemic may even have inspired lots of people to take a bit more care of themselves.



A recent survey by the British Heart Foundation (BHF) to mark National Heart Month, running through February, found 63% of people say they're now more concerned about looking after their physical health.

But, with gyms closed and life restricted to a tight radius, how can you boost your hearth health?

We've come up with some lockdown-approved ways to show your ticker some TLC this month – and bonus – they might help break up the boredom too...

KEEP WALKING

IT might seem like going for walks is all we do these days – but at least our hearts could benefit. A 2015 Cambridge University study, which followed more than 300,000 people over 12 years, found those who took a brisk 20-minute daily walk were 16–30% less likely to die early, compared with inactive folk.

“You don’t have to run a marathon to consider yourself physically active,” says BHF senior cardiac nurse, Barbara Kobson.

“The government’s recommendation is that, on average, everyone should try to get 150 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity per week, and walking is a simple, effective way of keeping active.”

SWITCH OUT SALT

HIGH blood pressure is a major risk factor in heart disease and stroke, and one of the key causes is consuming too much salt.

According to Action on Salt, if all UK adults stuck to the recommended 6g a day (the current average intake is 8.1g a day), around 17,000 lives a year could be saved.

Stock up on herbs and spices to flavour food in stead.

KNOW YOUR NUMBERS

YOU don’t always need to see your GP to check things like your blood pressure and cholesterol. Home testing kits can be ordered online, or your community pharmacy could help. High cholesterol and blood pressure rarely cause symptoms in the beginning, so checking your numbers can be really useful for preventing cardiovascular conditions.

TRY A HEART-BOOSTING CHALLENGE

THE British Heart Foundation is encouraging people to take part in a Mystemp or Mycycle Challenge, where you can set a target and spread it throughout the month. Not only will your own hearth health benefit, but you’ll be supporting vital research into heart conditions and treatments.

“Our recent survey shows many people are determined to get more active due to the pandemic. And right now, we need support more than ever,” says Barbara, explaining the impact of the pandemic on the BHF’S budget “puts vital research advances at risk”.

SKIP A TAKEAWAY

ON that note, why not forgo a takeaway and donate the money you’ve saved to BHF? As well as supporting research, use it as inspiration to cook something healthy from scratch. Processed foods and takeaways often contain more salt and saturated fats, which is linked with higher cholesterol.

GET A TASTE OF THE MED

MISSING those holiday vibes? Ok, recreating some Mediterranean nights at home won’t be quite the same, but it might help lift some of the lockdown gloom.

Plus, the Mediterranean diet is famed for its health-boosting benefits, and this includes people with a prior history of heart problems.

“Research has shown a Mediterranean diet can actually reduce one’s risk of having another heart attack,” says Barbara.

“It’s a diet that typically includes oily fish, fruit, vegetables, wholegrains and modest amounts of meat and low-fat dairy, and unsaturated fat such as olive oil, as opposed to saturated fat such as butter.”

TRY SOME PLANT-BASED RECIPES

FED up with lockdown groundhog day dinners? How about jazzing things up by trying more plantbased recipes and meals?

Veganuary might be over, but the health-boosting benefits of eating a varied, fibre-rich plant-based diet certainly aren't – and there's growing evidence around the role of the gut microbiome in overall health, including heart health.

So give yours a boost and pack in some plant-based delights.

HAVE MORE BOOZE-FREE DAYS

IF you're concerned about your lockdown drinking habits, Heart Month could be further inspiration to cut down. "We know that drinking more than the recommended intake of alcohol can impact your heart and general health, so staying within the guidelines (14 units per week) is key," says Barbara.

These should be spread across at least a few days – but Barbara says it's important to "ensure you're having alcohol-free days too".

And if you're picking a theme for your next Zoom social? How about booze-free bingo, or tee-total tarot readings (yes OK, we might be getting carried away there – but you get the idea!).

■ To find out more about British Heart Foundation's Heart Month challenges, see bhf.org.uk/how-you-can-help/fundraise/my-step-challenge