- Heart diseases

HEART HEALTH ON A BUDGET

February is REDFEB: heart awareness month. In addition to encouraging people to wear red and donate, Heart Research Australia is raising awareness about how Australians can take control of their cardiovascular well-being without breaking the bank.

Heart disease doesn't discriminate based on your income. Whether you're a millionaire or living on a tight budget, taking care of your heart is paramount.

"Heart disease affects 2 in 3 Australians and still remains our leading cause of death. Prioritising heart health is an investment in your future, both health-wise and financially," says Nicci Dent, CEO of Heart Research Australia. "The financial implications of heart disease are not just limited to medical costs. Recovery from heart attacks often leads to lost wages, reduced work capacity, and hindered career advancement, due to the physical and mental effects of the condition. Furthermore, higher health insurance premiums and the rapid depletion of retirement savings pose long-term financial challenges."

As the cost of living continues to rise, budgeting for health can often seem like a luxury. However, the financial implications of ignoring your heart health can be far more severe in the long run. In 2019–20, a staggering $12.7 billion was allocated to cardiovascular disease (CVD) in the Australian health system, representing 9.1% of the total expenditure. Furthermore, over two-thirds of this CVD expenditure, equivalent to $8.8 billion, went toward hospital services.

"It is concerning, but not surprising, to hear that there has been a substantial decline in household spending on health insurance since interest rates began to rise. In June 2023, this expense was 10 percent lower compared to the previous year. In the midst of the current economic climate, it is

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wellbeing

imperative to seek out cost-effective methods to safeguard your heart – as heart disease can impact anyone at any time," continued Ms Dent.

Maggie Dent, a beloved Australian parenting author and host of the podcast Parental As Anything, understands the importance of heart health.

"My smartwatch alerted me to a high heart rate, leading to a diagnosis of atrial flutter, despite having no symptoms. My journey emphasises the importance of swift action, prioritising heart health, and routine check-ups. In financially challenging times, a heart-healthy lifestyle doesn't have to be expensive. Embrace simple joys like family walks and connecting with friends to reduce stress. It benefits your whole family's health and wallet," says Maggie.

In response to these challenges, Heart Research Australia is advocating affordable ways to maintain heart health. Dr Avedis Ekmejian, a senior cardiologist and researcher supported by Heart Research Australia, provides his expert tips:

■ **Eating Heart-Healthy Foods:** A heart-healthy diet doesn't have to be costly. Focus on affordable staples such as beans, lentils, whole grains, and vegetables. These foods are not only nutritious but also easy on your wallet. Avoid excessive processed foods, sugary snacks, and fast food, which can be both unhealthy

and costly. Eating 5 or more vegetables every day reduces the risk of cardiovascular disease by almost 17%.

■ **Staying Active:** 4 in 5 Australians don't do enough exercise, yet physical activity is essential for heart health. You don't need an expensive gym membership to stay fit. Consider free or low-cost options like walking, jogging, or home workouts. Gardening and household chores can also help you stay active while saving money. Try to be physically active for at least 2.5 hours every week, spreading it out over five or more days.

■ **Managing Stress:** Chronic stress can take a toll on your heart. Finding cost-effective ways to manage stress is vital. Heart Research Australia recommend relaxation techniques like deep breathing, meditation, or yoga, which can be done at home or with minimal expenses. Spending time in nature or with loved ones can also provide emotional support without breaking the bank.

■ **Regular Health Check-ups:** Preventive care is key to maintaining heart health. While it may seem counterintuitive to spend money on doctor visits, regular check-ups can help detect issues early and save you money in the long run. Look for affordable healthcare options or community clinics in your area. Smoking is a significant risk factor for heart

disease. Quitting smoking is not only beneficial for your health but also for your wallet. Seek free or low-cost resources to help you kick the habit.

Heart Research Australia extends an invitation to all Australians to explore their free online Heart Hub, where you can access a wealth of expert advice on cultivating heart-healthy habits. The Heart Hub provides information on mitigating risk factors, optimising your diet, embracing effective exercise routines, and mastering stress reduction techniques.

Nutritionist Chloe Steele says "Eight out of ten instances of premature heart disease and stroke can be prevented through healthy lifestyle choices. The foundation of this prevention lies in health literacy, as knowledge is the key to a healthier heart."

Heart Research Australia invites all Australians to wear RED this February and donate to fund vital research to combat heart disease. "Cardiovascular disease affects more than four million Australians and is responsible for 1 in 4 deaths. Research is undeniably a life-saving endeavour, says Dent. "That's why Heart Research Australia tirelessly supports world-class and emerging researchers in their pursuit of ground-breaking studies for the prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of heart disease."

For more information on REDFEB and to donate, please visit:
heartresearch.com.au