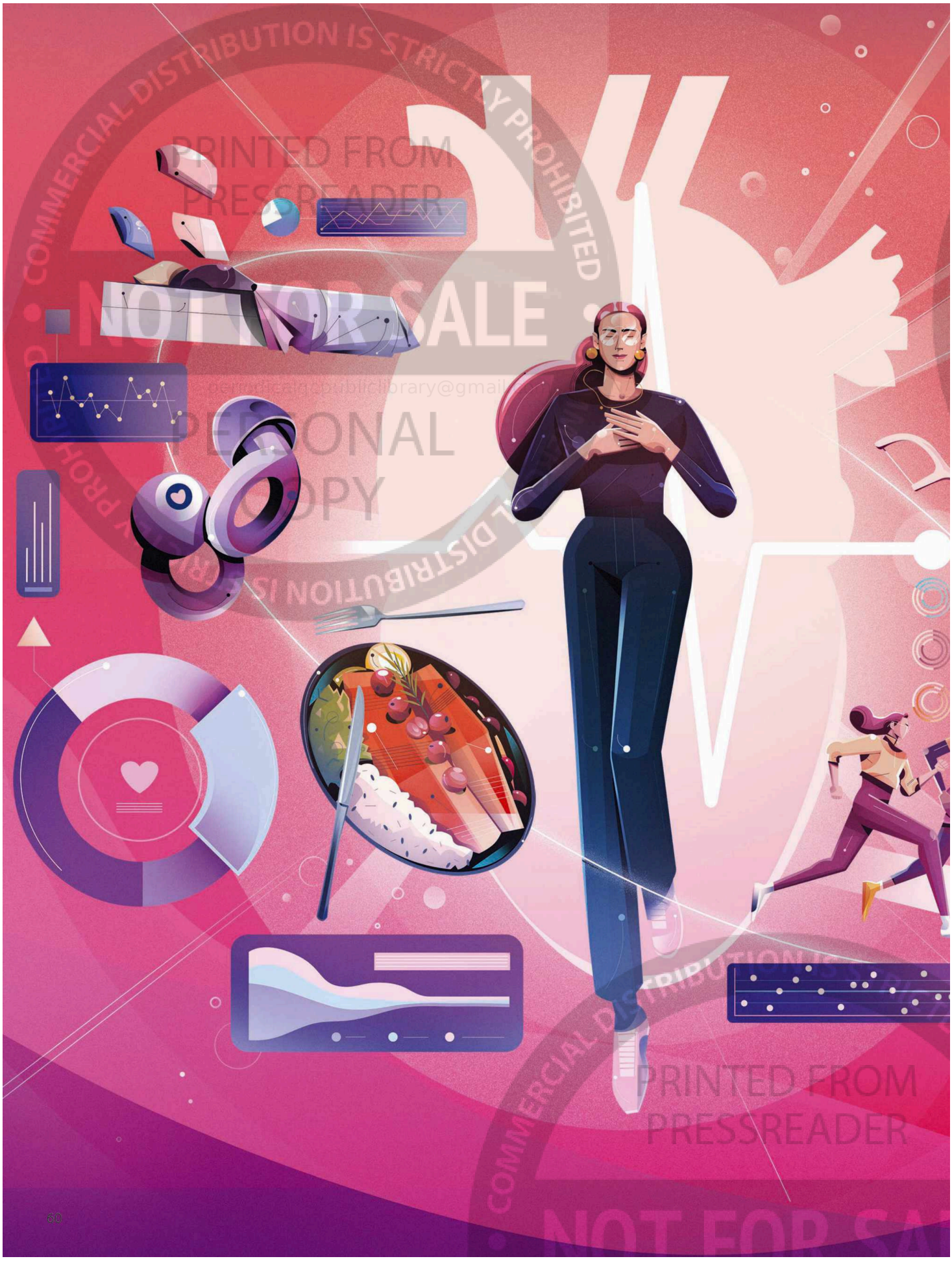
- Heart / Lifestyle



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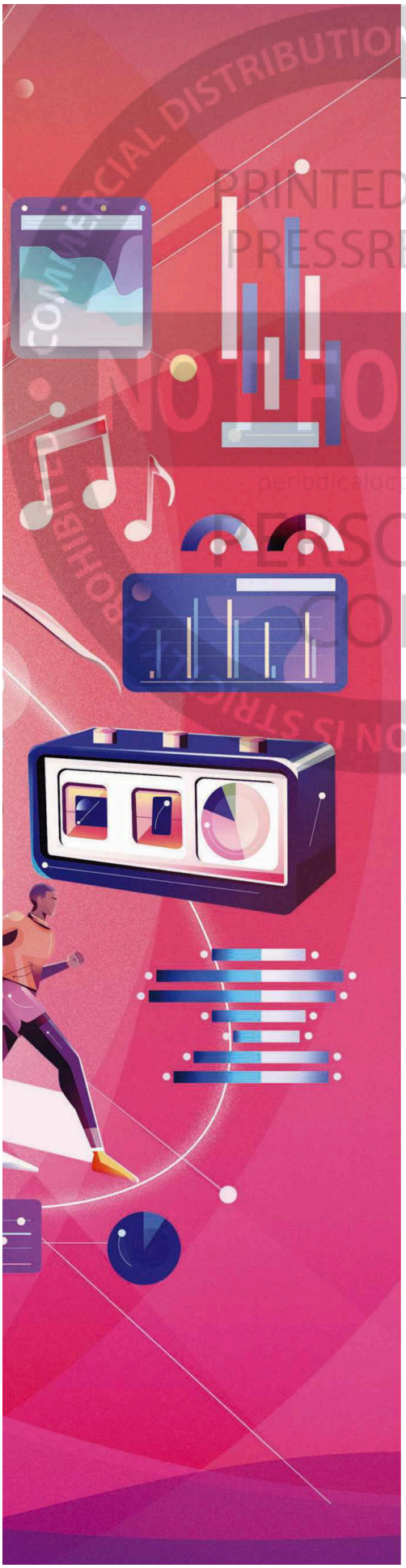

ILLUSTRATION: JOE WALDRON

GET HEART SMART

Words by SOPHIE FREEMAN Illustration by JOE WALDRON

NEW STUDIES HAVE SHOWN THAT SEVERAL SMALL LIFESTYLE CHANGES CAN DRASTICALLY IMPROVE YOUR HEART HEALTH

Modern life isn't doing our hearts any favours. We sit too much (over nine hours a day, on average), are regularly overwhelmed by stress (now linked to chronic inflammation – a key risk for heart disease) and fill more than half of our plates with ultra-processed foods (shown to drastically increase stroke risk). It's little wonder heart disease is now the world's number one killer, accounting for 13 per cent of all deaths on Earth, according to the World Health Organization.

It gets worse. Research suggests that heart disease risk is now rising with each new generation: a University of Oxford study found that people in their 50s and 60s today are up to 1.5 times more likely than their grandparents to develop heart disease at the same age.

Rising obesity rates, as you'd guess, play a role here. But worrying recent research from Harvard Medical School suggests that even people with a normal body mass index could be at risk due to hidden 'fatty muscles'. After studying 700 people admitted to hospital with shortness of breath (but whose arteries weren't clogged), the scientists found that those with more fat lodged in their muscles were more likely to have damage to the tiny blood vessels supplying the heart. Six years later, these people were more likely to be hospitalised for heart disease and had a much higher risk of premature death.

New hidden risks to your heart seem to appear every month. But, reassuringly, so does new evidence for the benefits of keeping your body's hardest working muscle healthy. One intriguing study by University College London, for example, has found that having a healthy heart at age 50 can lower your overall risk of developing dementia, even if you're already experiencing cognitive decline.

Recent research has also suggested better heart health can improve your mental resilience, increase your overall life satisfaction and may even slow ageing. According to the *Journal of the American Heart Association*, adopting 'heart healthy' habits could keep your body biologically young – as measured by DNA methylation (changes in your DNA that occur over time) – while the number of candles on your birthday cake increases.

So, what are the simple habits that'll keep your heart healthy? You'll know the big stuff already: don't smoke, eat less junk food, move more and reduce your alcohol intake. But there's also a trove of little-known, science-backed lessons to help keep your ticker in tip-top shape... →

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TAKE EXERCISE SNACKS

If breaking up your workouts into a series of 10-minute 'bite-size' sessions sounds more doable than a continuous 30-minute routine, know that science is on your side.

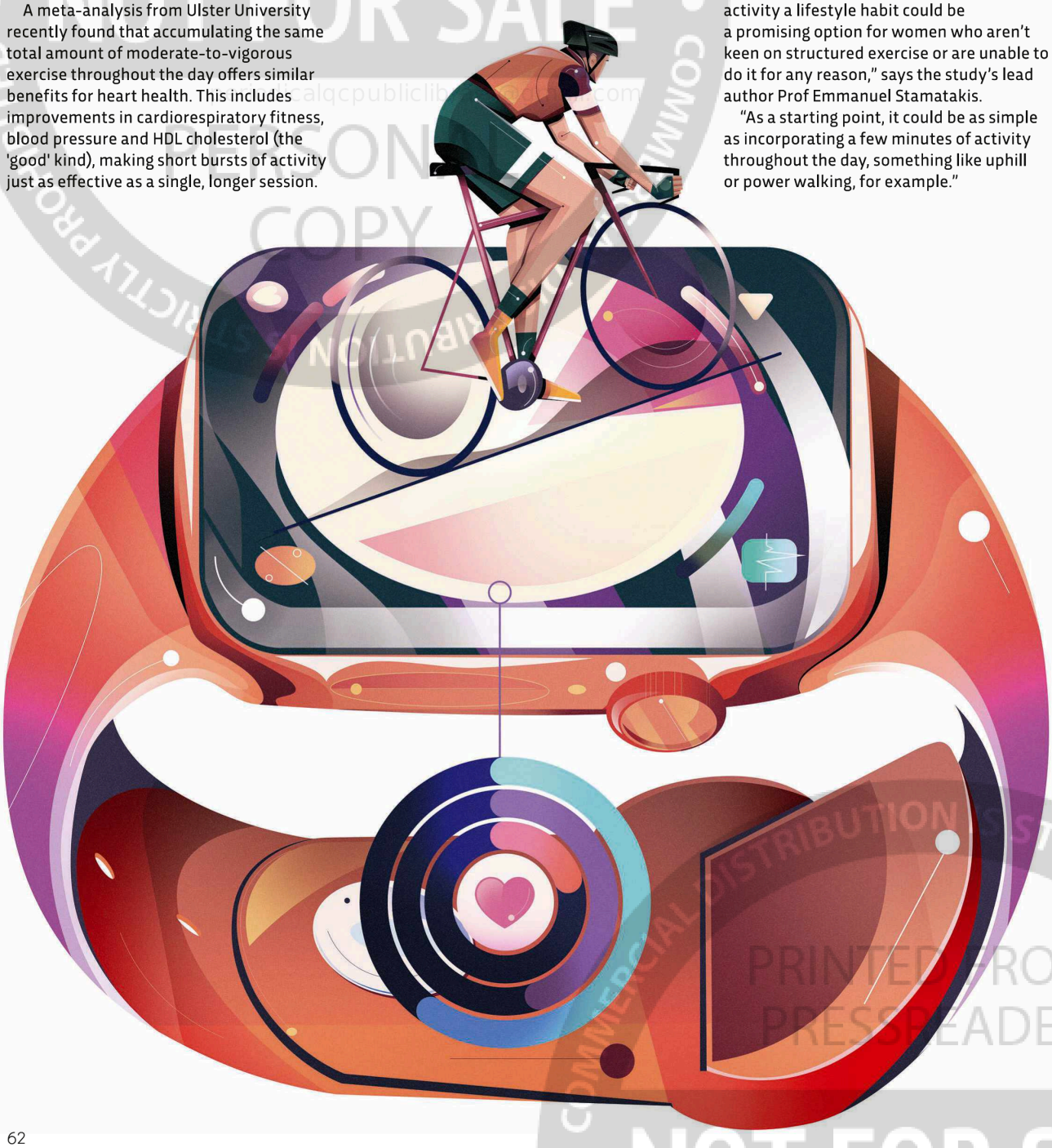
A meta-analysis from Ulster University recently found that accumulating the same total amount of moderate-to-vigorous exercise throughout the day offers similar benefits for heart health. This includes improvements in cardiorespiratory fitness, blood pressure and HDL cholesterol (the 'good' kind), making short bursts of activity just as effective as a single, longer session.

"Splitting a continuous bout of exercise into shorter bouts of equivalent total duration spread over the course of a day doesn't alter its potential to provide health benefits," the Ulster researchers concluded.

Don't have a 10-minute stretch to spare? One University of Sydney-led study suggests that even adding just four minutes a day of vigorous activity – climbing the stairs, say – in chunks of one minute or more can halve the risk of a heart attack for women who are normally relatively sedentary (the results were less clear in men).

"Making short bursts of vigorous physical activity a lifestyle habit could be a promising option for women who aren't keen on structured exercise or are unable to do it for any reason," says the study's lead author Prof Emmanuel Stamatakis.

"As a starting point, it could be as simple as incorporating a few minutes of activity throughout the day, something like uphill or power walking, for example."



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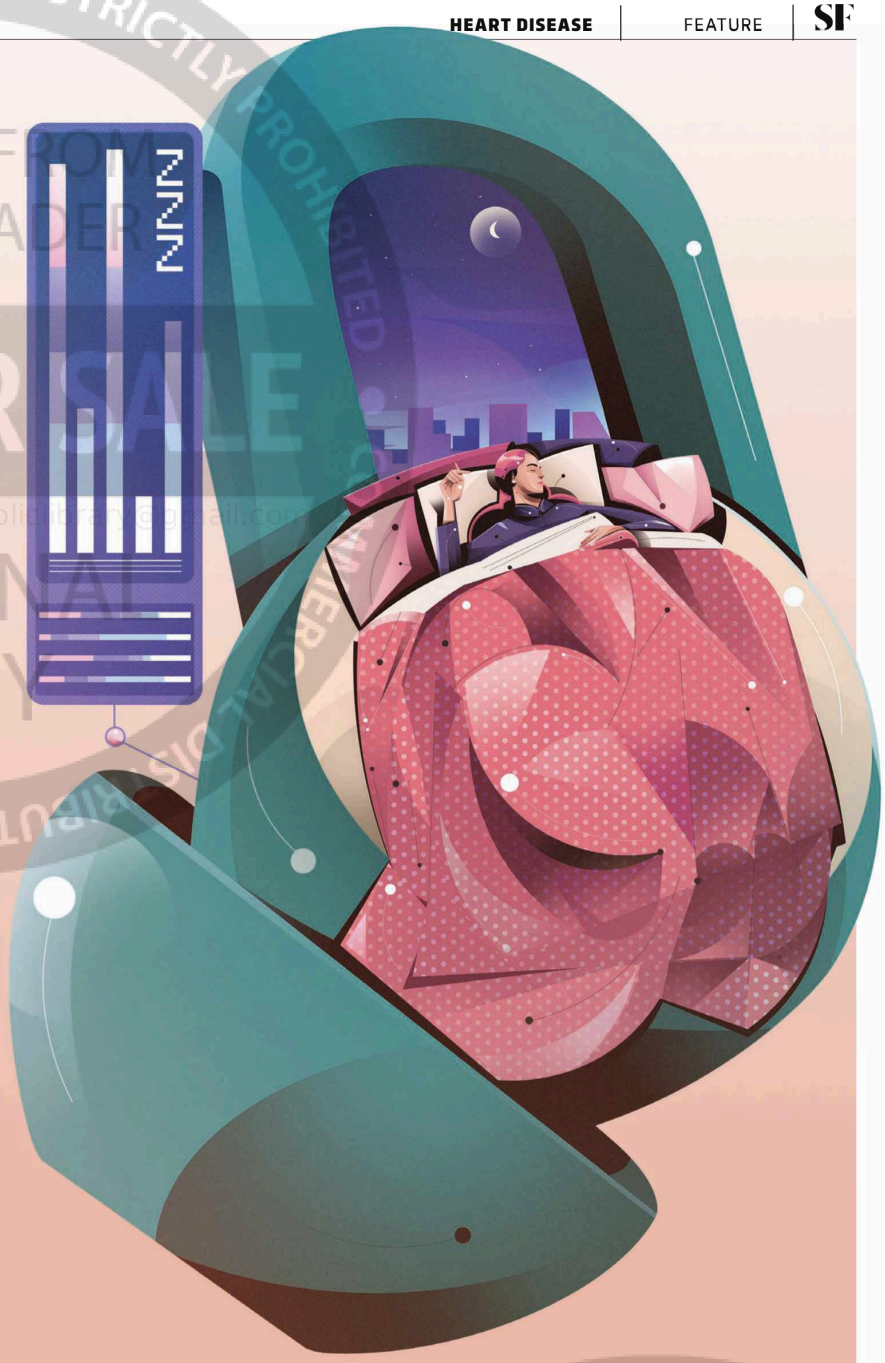
SOUND ASLEEP



Whether it's police sirens, trains clattering by or late-night revellers making a racket, nighttime noise is more than just an annoyance – it could be harming your heart.

"After 15 years of research, we're convinced that noise is a cardiovascular risk factor, just like diabetes, hypertension [high blood pressure], high cholesterol or smoking," says Prof Thomas Münzel, an environmental cardiologist at the University of Mainz, in Germany.

"Frequently interrupted sleep causes strong stress reactions, leading to cardiovascular dysfunction."

Coronary artery disease, heart failure, arrhythmia (a problem with the rhythm of the heart), high blood pressure and strokes: Münzel has found your risk of all these conditions is connected to loud and disruptive nighttime noise.

The same is true even if the racket doesn't wake you. Münzel has observed how nighttime noise can trigger your body's stress response when you're sleeping, releasing hormones such as cortisol. Too much of this stress hormone can harm your blood vessels over time, mainly by causing oxidative stress. This happens when harmful molecules (free radicals) outnumber protective ones (antioxidants), leading to cell damage.

Hearing loud noise while you're sleeping also prevents the natural dipping of blood pressure, the absence of which is linked to increased risk for cardiovascular disease.

It's no surprise, then, that an analysis of 25,000 heart-related deaths near Zurich Airport (2000–2015) found that planes passing overhead at night were linked to higher death rates, especially in women.

Concerned? If so, check the sound levels around your bed (try a free Decibel Meter app on your phone) – Münzel has found that a single night of sleeping in a room with 30 decibels of noise – equivalent to the sound of people talking quietly – is enough to impair blood vessel function.

If your bedroom is too loud, consider finding a quieter room. Or just wear earplugs. As one Australian study suggested, do this and your cardio system could see the benefits in as little as a week.

ILLUSTRATIONS: JOE WALDRON

"AN ANALYSIS OF 25,000 HEART-RELATED DEATHS NEAR ZURICH AIRPORT FOUND THAT PLANES PASSING OVERHEAD AT NIGHT WERE LINKED TO HIGHER DEATH RATES, ESPECIALLY IN WOMEN"

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SING YOUR HEART OUT

Keeping your heart healthy can start as soon as you get out of bed and step into the shower. As long as you belt out a few musical numbers while you're washing. That's according to several studies, including research by the Medical College of Wisconsin that found singing for 14 minutes a day could have a similar positive impact on your heart rate variability (HRV) as light exercise.

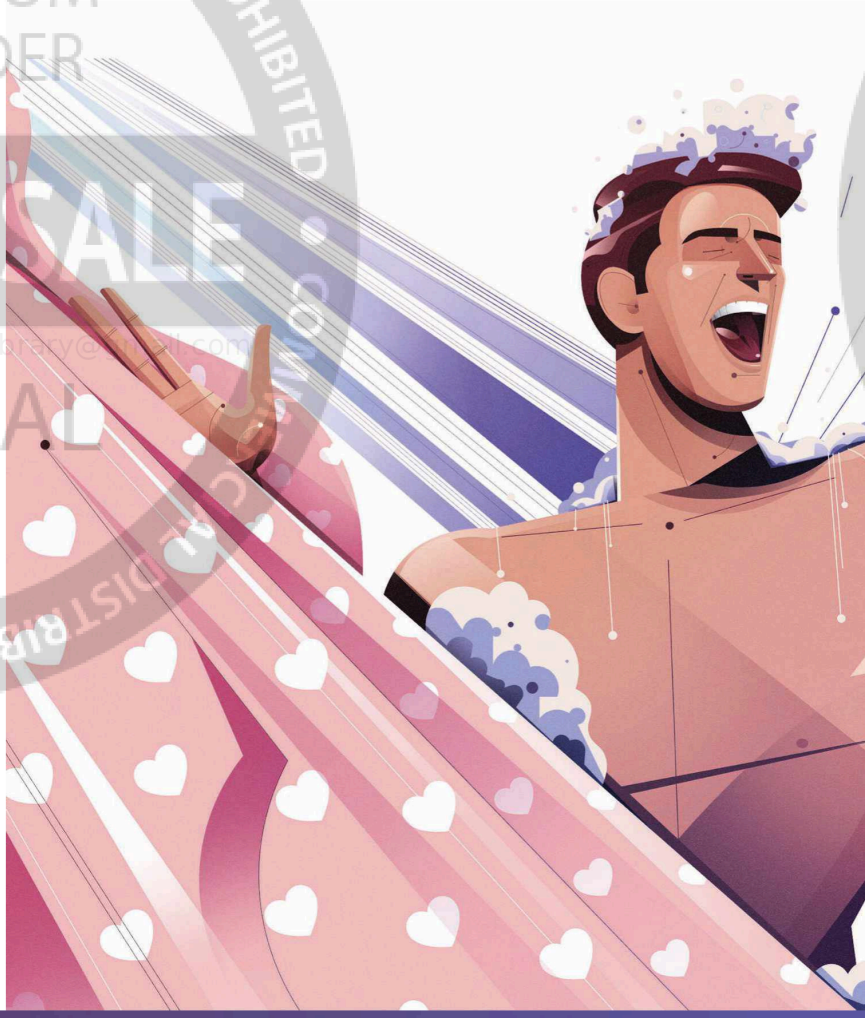
As anyone with a fitness tracker will know HRV – the variation in the time between heartbeats – is one of the key hallmarks of cardio health. A high HRV indicates your body is more resilient and adaptable to stress.

"Physiologically, singing involves controlled diaphragmatic breathing and sustained exhalation, which improve respiratory function," says Ragavendra Baliga, a cardiologist and professor of internal medicine at Ohio State University, in the US.

He adds that singing mimics exercise by "increasing oxygen consumption and heart rate while fostering synchronisation between heart rhythms and respiration, a calming effect known as respiratory sinus arrhythmia."

Singing with friends and family might be even better for your cardio health (though maybe step out of the shower for this). "Group singing, in particular, enhances emotional wellbeing through social connection and collective rhythm," says Baliga.

"Positive emotional states reduce stress and anxiety, which lowers the activation of the sympathetic nervous system and stress hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline," he adds. "This, in turn, decreases blood pressure and systemic inflammation – factors that contribute to cardiovascular disease."





GO WITH YOUR GUT

You've probably heard that the Mediterranean diet is a good one to follow. In fact, you'll likely roll your eyes if we say you should add more vegetables, beans, whole grains and fish to your plate. But we've got good reason to keep bringing this up.

New research has uncovered a surprising connection between your gut microbiota (the vast community of microbes living in your gut) and the build-up of fatty deposits in your arteries, a process scientists call 'furring'. In other words, what's on your dinner plate may influence your heart health in ways you never expected.

"In all cardiovascular diseases, there are studies showing that gut microbiota modulate their development," says Dr Meritxell Nus Chimeno, a British Heart Foundation research fellow at the University of

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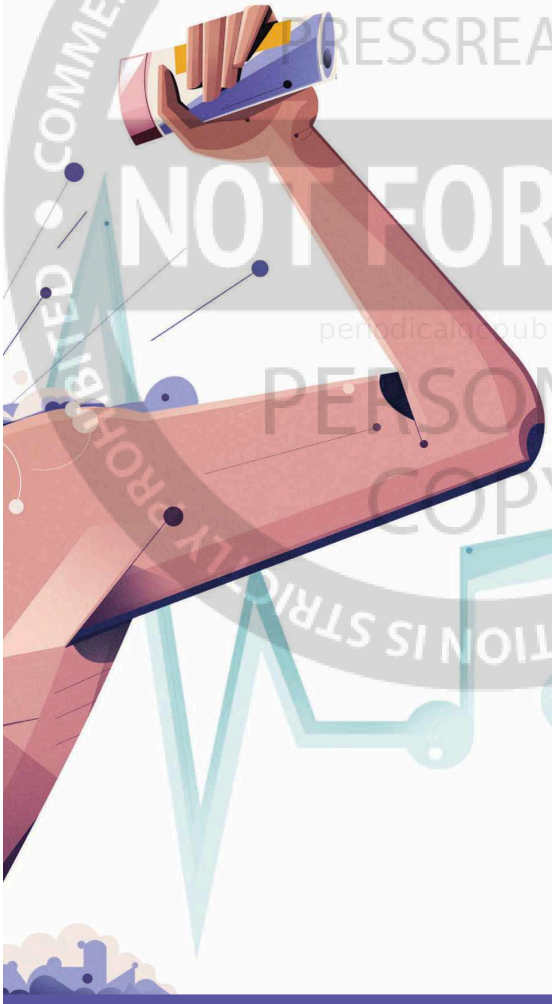

Cambridge. The key to bettering the relationship between your gut and heart? A diverse microbiota, according to Nus Chimeno.

"You want to avoid a dramatic imbalance in the composition and function of these microorganisms – what's called gut dysbiosis. This can lead to a 'leaky gut' [when the barrier between the gut and the bloodstream breaks down] and systemic inflammation causing obesity and cardiovascular disease," she explains.

"Many studies have demonstrated that a diverse gut can be achieved with a diverse Mediterranean-type diet, rich in all sorts of fruits, vegetables, fish and olive oil."

The link between your gut and heart health is now so robust that a major review from Italy's University of Palermo has concluded that "promoting the adoption of the Mediterranean diet could be an effective strategy for mitigating the burden of cardiovascular disease globally."

ILLUSTRATIONS: JOE WALDRON

MIND THE NAP

Many past studies have suggested that an afternoon nap is great for your heart. One large study, carried out by a team at the University of Athens, found that apparently healthy people, particularly working men, who took a siesta were less likely to have died from a heart problem when followed up with six years later.

But there are caveats. The biggest is that benefits disappear if you nap for too long. A meta-analysis by scientists at the University of Tokyo, for example, found a daily snooze of more than 60 minutes was linked to a higher risk of death from a heart problem.

So, what exact physiological changes does napping have on your heart? Here lies the problem. A lot of the research that's been done on napping is observational, so it can't show cause and effect. A long nap, in itself, might not be harmful, but it might be a reflection of poor sleep at night. In short, it's important to consider the reasons you fancy those 40 winks mid-afternoon.

"As we age, we tend not to need as much sleep at night and some older people also have a nap in the afternoon – that's okay. A concern would be when there's something, such as sleep apnoea, that's making a person tired in the afternoon," says Chris Gale, a professor of cardiovascular medicine at the University of Leeds.

Sleep apnoea is where the throat relaxes and becomes narrow or closed during sleep, thus interrupting normal breathing. And it's a big problem for your heart. "It's associated with cardiovascular diseases including high blood pressure, heart failure, atrial fibrillation and stroke," says Gale. "Sleep apnoea can mean you have a poor night's sleep without realising it, causing you to nod off during the daytime."

Signs to look for include habitual snoring and having a thick neck, which is classed as 43cm (17in) or more in men and 41cm (16in) or more in women.



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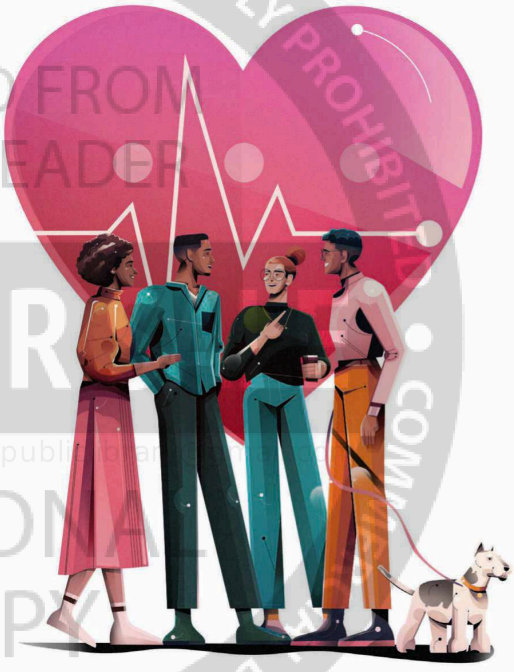

LONELY HEARTS CLUB

Loneliness isn't just bad for your mental health, it can take a serious toll on your heart. One major meta-analysis by the University of York found that lonely older adults have a 29-per-cent increased risk of coronary heart disease. Looking specifically at heart failure, where the heart is unable to pump blood around the body properly because it's too weak or stiff, a 2023 study of the UK Biobank revealed that socially isolated or lonely people had a 15–20-per-cent higher risk.

Interestingly, the same study found whether or not a person felt lonely was more important than if they were actually alone. Subjective loneliness appears to be a stronger psychological (and therefore cardiovascular) stressor than social isolation, likely because it often occurs in people who experience "hostile or stressful social relationships", the study concluded.

There's physiological evidence to support this. Further research from the University of Cambridge has found higher levels of certain brain proteins in people who feel lonely.

"Loneliness, being a chronic stressor, has actions on proteins involved in the stress response and the cardiovascular system in particular," says Prof Barbara Sahakian, one of the scientists involved in the research.

"There's evidence for a link between stress, heart disease and stroke. Stress can cause increased blood pressure and also has other damaging effects that can lead to a heart attack or stroke."

So, how can you feel less lonely? One step is to be kinder to the people you already know: one Australian paper found people who performed small daily acts of kindness for their neighbours each day (mowing their lawn, offering them meals or simply talking to them) significantly reduced their feelings of loneliness in just four weeks.

If you'd rather not speak to the neighbour who insists on playing his drum kit at 2am (thus impacting your heart health), consider joining a volunteer group instead. A study of 13,000 US adults discovered that those who volunteered at least 100 hours per year had a significantly lower risk of dying from a cardiac event over four years, compared to non-volunteers. The same study also recorded much lower levels of depressive symptoms in volunteers. In other words, lending a hand could save your heart in more ways than one.



DENTAL CLARITY

Spotted blood in the basin when brushing your teeth? It could be a sign of a lot more than just gum trouble.

"There's reasonably good evidence that gingivitis [gum inflammation] is associated with cardiac disease," says Prof Chris Gale. Gingivitis occurs when plaque – a sticky film of bacteria – builds up on teeth, releasing toxins that irritate the gums. Left untreated, this can lead to chronic inflammation, which is associated with atherosclerosis, a condition where fatty deposits narrow the arteries, increasing the risk of cardiovascular disease.

If you notice a problem, speak to your doctor or dentist. But the best approach is prevention.

A 2025 study, presented at the American Stroke Association's International Stroke Conference, found that people who floss at least once a week have a 44-per-cent lower risk of cardioembolic stroke (caused by blood clots travelling from the heart) and a 12-per-cent lower risk of atrial fibrillation (an irregular heartbeat that raises stroke risk). These benefits were seen regardless of whether participants also brushed their teeth regularly (twice a day).

Of course, correlation isn't causation: the people who engage in other healthy behaviours are also more likely to floss. Still, if your teeth or gums show signs of trouble, it might be time to check in on your heart health, too. Indeed, the European Society of Cardiology argues that dental screening programmes, including regular check-ups and education on proper dental hygiene, may "help to prevent first and subsequent negative heart events." SF

"PEOPLE WHO FLOSS AT LEAST ONCE A WEEK HAVE A 44-PER-CENT LOWER RISK OF STROKE"

by SOPHIE FREEMAN

Sophie is a science writer who specialises in health and psychology.

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