



# ‘HOW CAN I KEEP MY HEART HEALTHY?’

Your heart is at the core of your wellbeing. This month our three wise women share advice on taking care of your ticker from a nutrition, fitness and mental wellbeing perspective.



## PAULINE SAYS...

Pauline Cox is a functional nutritionist and author of *Hungry Woman: Eating for Good Health, Happiness + Hormones* (Ebury). She also runs health food store and café Sow and Arrow near Bristol ([sowandarrow.com](http://sowandarrow.com)). Follow her at [instagram.com/paulinejcox](https://www.instagram.com/paulinejcox).



### START NOW

It is never too soon to think about keeping your heart healthy! Although you have a lower risk of heart issues when younger, when you reach menopause, your risk begins to match mens. Heart health covers many conditions, from blood vessels, valves and heart muscle to irregular heart beat (arrhythmias) and heart defects. However, many conditions are preventable, so a focus on diet and lifestyle can significantly reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease, including heart attack, stroke and heart disease. For example, smoking, lack of exercise, obesity, unhealthy diet and stress, have a significant impact on your heart health. So, work on making healthier lifestyle choices and lowering stress.

### AVOID SUGAR-SPIKING FOODS

If you eat foods that significantly and continuously spike your blood sugar, your pancreas dutifully pumps out more insulin to mop up

the glucose and usher it into the cells to use for fuel. If this pattern continues for long enough, insulin stops working as effectively, resulting in insulin resistance. At this stage more insulin is needed to keep blood sugars balanced and as insulin levels creep up, there is a significant impact on your health. First, high levels of insulin encourage your body to store fat and to stop using it for fuel. Secondly, high levels of insulin cause blood vessels to become constricted, driving up your blood pressure. Both of these changes are risk factors for your long-term heart health.

### EAT FOR HEART HEALTH

Instead, choose foods that have less impact on your blood sugar, prioritising high-quality protein, such as steamed fish, chicken, boiled eggs and tofu. Generously fill your plate with magnesium-rich leafy greens, such as spinach and kale. Magnesium helps to reduce insulin resistance and lower blood pressure.

Cauliflower, broccoli, beetroot and brightly coloured vegetables are packed with vitamins, minerals and fibre so are helpful heart allies, as are vitamin C-rich foods such as sauerkraut and dark-coloured berries such as blackcurrants.

### MIND THE CARBS

It is not just white sugar that raises blood sugars. Breads, pasta, pastries, cake and crackers can all trigger a blood-sugar peak. A continuous glucose monitor wearable device can be a helpful ally in checking the impact of certain foods on your blood sugar. Hormones also play a part, as oestrogen levels decline during peri-menopause, women are less able to mop up sugar from the blood, leaving you more prone to insulin resistance, weight gain and an increased risk of heart conditions. So, crack open the sauerkraut and start loading up on greens because what's good for your heart is also good for your hormones!

WORDS: PAULINE COX, KATE ROWE-HAM, SUZY READING. IMAGES: SHUTTERSTOCK.

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TOPSANTÉ 37



### KATE SAYS...

Kate Rowe-Ham is a PT specialising in helping midlife women get strong and feel good. She's the founder of app *Owning Your Menopause* ([owningyourmenopause.com](http://owningyourmenopause.com)) and a patron of the Menopause Mandate. Follow her at [instagram.com/katerh\\_fitness](https://www.instagram.com/katerh_fitness).

#### PUT HEART HEALTH FIRST

Your heart is a muscle that tirelessly pumps blood to keep you alive. It is at the core of your wellbeing, yet heart disease remains the leading cause of death worldwide. Regular exercise is one of the most effective ways to protect and strengthen this vital organ. Exercise improves cardiovascular fitness by increasing your heart's efficiency and circulation. Regular physical activity balances insulin and can mitigate insulin sensitivity, reduce inflammation, and help you maintain a healthy weight – all critical factors in heart health.

#### GET MOVING

Official health guidelines recommend adults do the following each week: at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity activity, 75 minutes of vigorous activity, or a mixture of both; strengthening activities on two days; and reducing extended periods of sitting. Moderate exercise, such as 30 minutes of walking, five days a week, can significantly reduce your heart disease risk.

#### TRY AEROBIC EXERCISE

Aerobic activities, such as brisk walking, running, swimming or cycling increase your heart rate,

strengthen the heart muscle and improve your ability to pump blood. This reduces resting heart rate and blood pressure, lowering the risk of heart disease. Physical activity also boosts HDL (good cholesterol) while lowering LDL (bad cholesterol) and triglycerides, helping to prevent artery blockages. In addition, resistance training, yoga and stretching also complement aerobic exercise by promoting overall muscle and vascular health.

#### HAVE A REGULAR ROUTINE

Exercise can also improve physical health and reduce stress, anxiety and depression, which all have negative impacts on heart health. Consistency is key to overall health and will have a more profound impact on heart health. It's best to maintain a regular routine, so incorporating sustainable, achievable exercise into your routine is a gift to your heart, empowering it to keep you thriving. Prioritise movement today for a healthier tomorrow.





### SUZY SAYS...

Suzy Reading is a chartered psychologist and author of *Self-Care For Tough Times* and her latest, *Self-Care For Winter* (both Aster). She specialises in helping people better manage their energy, emotions and stress. Find her at [suzyreading.co.uk](http://suzyreading.co.uk) and at [instagram.com/suzyreading](https://www.instagram.com/suzyreading).

#### MIND INFLUENCES HEART

Heart health and mental health are closely linked. For years it was thought the connection was behavioural but it is now known that there are physiological connections too. New evidence suggests the biochemical factors underlying mental health issues may have an influence on heart disease, also. Daily stressors, such as those related to parenting and work demands, can increase your risk of heart disease. Loneliness is also linked with an increased risk of heart attack or stroke. The good news is that compassionately tending to your stress levels and meeting your needs for social connection can have a powerful impact on both heart health and mental health.

#### MAKE TIME FOR YOU

You're not alone if you don't have the same social mojo in winter. The key is to honour the impulse

to hibernate without isolating yourself. Protect yourself from loneliness by tweaking the way that you socialise, scheduling phone catch-ups, going for morning walks or meeting for brunch if you can't face going out in the dark.

There's also shared humanity to be found in listening to podcasts or reading books about themes that matter to you. There's also great sustenance in snuggling in and connecting with yourself, or your pet too!

#### BREATHE STRESS AWAY

When emotions run high or stress accumulates, cultivate a gentle release with "candle breath". Breathe in through your nose and exhale through pursed lips, as if you are cooling a cup of hot tea. This longer exhalation soothes your nervous system and the action of this breathing exercise softens your jaw, which can be a common place for holding tension. Dot your day

with this purposeful pause and feel how it helps you extend a little more kindness to yourself. Repeat it regularly and it can be a useful pressure release valve, so you don't finish the day feeling ready to boil over like Mount Vesuvius!

#### RAISE YOUR LEGS

Benefit body and mind by elevating your legs against a wall, or if it's more comfortable for your hamstrings, settle on the floor in front of your sofa and bring your legs up and onto the seat. Give yourself permission to flop and drop here for as long as you can spare: the world can wait.

Not only is this a fantastic way to relax, but when you elevate your legs, the blood flow from your limbs is redirected to the heart and vital organs. Think of this as your daily restorative prescription for heart and mental health and you'll get benefits in as little as five minutes a day.

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TOPSANTÉ 39