



We need to get this heart disease research integrated into clinical practice faster so more women can benefit from it.



Heart smart

The body's powerhouse is affected by what you eat, how you move, your state of mind – and that means there's so much you can do to keep it ticking. Here's everything you need to know.

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Cardiologist Dr Nieca Goldberg is passionate about the need for care equity – the idea that when it comes to heart disease, all practitioners need to give women as much attention as they give men. Women must take heed as well: Heart disease is the number one killer of Australian women, with one of us dying every hour. And if a woman suffers from a cardiac issue, her symptoms may well be different from a man's.

Yes, the most common symptom for everyone is the classic chest discomfort, tightness or pressure, says Dr Goldberg. “But sometimes a woman may experience severe shortness of breath without chest discomfort,” she points out. “Or the discomfort is lower down in the chest, and she may mistake it for a stomach ailment. Some women experience upper back pressure or unexplained exhaustion when doing very minimal exercise.”

Another difference for women, says Dr Goldberg, is in the risk factors. “There are standard heart disease risks that men and women share, like high cholesterol, high blood pressure, diabetes, cigarette smoking, obesity and lack of exercise. But specific to women are pregnancy-related complications that raise their risk even years later: preeclampsia, preterm birth, hypertension during pregnancy, and gestational diabetes.”

What this means, Dr Goldberg says, is that it's critical for doctors to take full medical histories and to ask women, even later in life, if they had any of the above complications during pregnancy or after giving birth. But not enough physicians know this, she adds: “There's so much research going on around women and heart disease, and we need to get this integrated into clinical practice faster so more women can benefit from it. It's time for better action for women.”

Her Heart (herheart.org), Australia's only not-for-profit focused on the prevention of women's heart disease, has recently created a free, downloadable wallet card to help women identify the female-specific heart attack signs and seek immediate medical attention. To grab yours, visit herheart.org/heart-attack-signs-in-women

7 days to a healthier heart

This challenge will give you one concrete step each day towards better cardiovascular health.

BY MARISA COHEN

DAY 1: Take the stairs

Exercise is one of the best all-around heart boosters:

It can help keep blood pressure in check, reduce levels of stress hormones, and assist muscles to pull oxygen out of the blood, among other things. And here's an easy way to get it in: Walk up stairs! Recent research from the US found that climbing more than five flights of stairs daily could reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease (CVD) by 20 per cent. And counting 50 steps going up is a lot simpler than counting 10,000 steps on flat ground! ▶



DAY 2: Strategise for better sleep

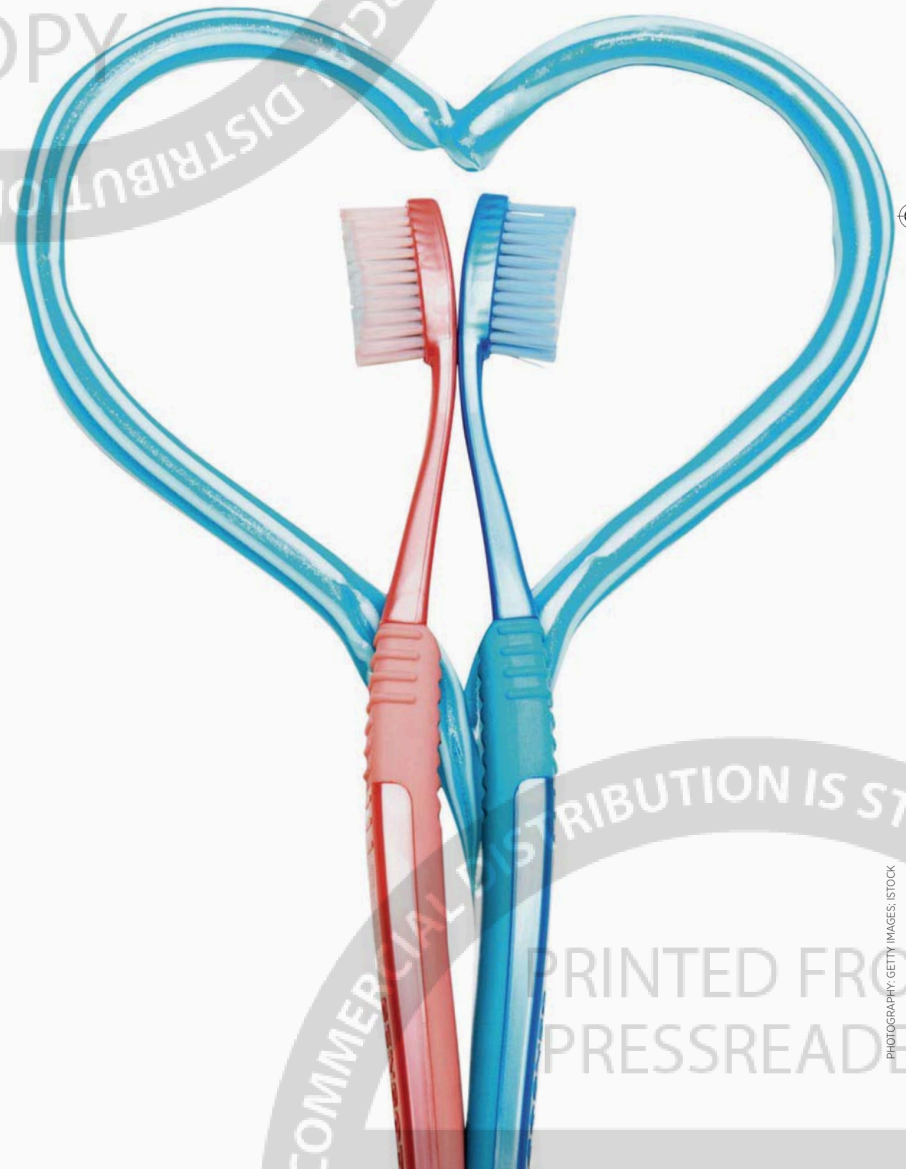
Chronic lack of sleep is associated with higher blood pressure and an increased risk of CVD. When we snooze, our blood pressure drops to its lowest point of the day, which helps us maintain healthy blood pressure during our waking hours, says sleep scientist Dr Rebecca Robbins. Today, set the stage for a better night's rest. First, consider installing blackout shades, as research shows that adults exposed to light when they sleep may be more likely to develop high blood pressure than those who sleep in complete darkness. Next, find a spot to charge your phone that's not in your bedroom so blue light won't keep you up. Finally, try to crash between 10pm and 11pm – a study found that people who fell asleep within this window had a lower rate of developing CVD than those who conked out earlier or later.

DAY 3: Limit ultra-processed foods

Eating whole foods is ideal but not always possible in our daily lives. Still, some processed foods are healthier than others; for instance, frozen strawberries and wholegrain bread are minimally processed to optimise nutrition. But new research ties ultra-processed foods (such as frozen dinners, packaged cookies and potato chips) to an increased risk of heart disease. One way to tell whether a food is ultra-processed: Check to see if the ingredient list includes things you wouldn't see at home, such as high-fructose corn syrup, emulsifiers and chemical additives. Take a look through your pantry and strategise a few easy-to-prepare alternatives (for example, instead of a frozen dinner, try our simple recipe ideas from page 118).

Red alert!

February is REDFEB, Heart Research Australia's initiative to help raise funds to support groundbreaking research into heart disease. To play your part, wear red this February – whether it's a dress, hat or shoes – and sign up or donate to help change the future of heart disease. Why not invite and ask your friends to sponsor you? To find out more, visit redfeb-25.raiselysite.com



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DAY 4: Get out!

It's easy to spend the entire day indoors – working in an office, doing chores around the house, and shuttling between the two in a car or by bus. Today, schedule a half-hour walk outdoors, preferably in a place where you can see at least a hint of the earth's wonders. Studies show that the calming nature of, well, nature can reduce blood pressure, heart rate and levels of the stress hormone cortisol. It can also help keep your brain healthy as you age. Even if you live in a concrete jungle, strolling in a local park for 30 minutes a day at least four times a week will deliver the full benefit.

DAY 5: Boost your omega-3s

Today, figure out a delicious way to get more of this nutritional powerhouse into your life. One recent study found that a diet including omega-3-rich foods was associated with a 10 per cent lower risk of cardiovascular disease and a 20 per cent reduced risk of fatal coronary heart disease. One delectable way to get omega-3s: from fatty fish such as salmon, mackerel and herring. If you're vegan, or just don't like fish, you can still get a mighty dose from plant-based foods such as walnuts and flaxseeds (sprinkle them on yoghurt, use them in a smoothie, or mix in a salad). If none of these options appeal to you, ask your GP if you should take a supplement, then look for one with 1000mg of fish oil, including omega-3 fatty acids EPA and DHA.



DAY 6: Schedule a dental check-up

You may be surprised to hear that prioritising dental health is not just good for your smile, but also important for your heart. Studies have shown that people with gum disease or tooth loss have a higher risk of developing heart disease. One theory is that bacteria that causes gum disease can travel through blood vessels, causing inflammation. So, make an appointment if you're due for one, and be sure to brush and floss twice daily.

DAY 7: Check your meds

Chat with your healthcare provider about your daily medications, as some meds can raise blood pressure. The most common culprits include certain antidepressants, nonsteroidal anti-inflammatories and oral steroids. This is particularly alarming when you consider that many Australians may be unaware that they already have high blood pressure, due to lack of symptoms. If you're on any of these treatments, it's worth having a discussion with an expert to see if it can be safely replaced. **P**