



WHAT TOP DOCS WISH YOU KNEW about heart disease

It's the Number 1 killer of women,
beating all types of cancer.
Protect your health — and your life
— with these 10 expert tips.

BY MICHELE BENDER AND NG MEI YAN
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You know that your

favourite kickboxing class helps to keep your ticker — as well as your figure — in top shape, and that your fast-food habit may cause your cholesterol level to rise. But you're young and healthy, so the chances of having a heart attack or stroke in the near future are pretty slim, right? Wrong. Heart disease and stroke kill one in three women in Singapore — this is eight times more than the number who die from breast cancer. What's more worrying is that only 8 per cent of Singaporean women recognise heart disease as the leading cause of death, according to a survey done by the Singapore Heart Foundation in 2007.

"Heart disease is a very common cause of death among women, even though the onset usually comes after menopause," says Dr Antonio Sutandar, consultant cardiologist at Raffles Hospital. "But if you smoke and have other lifestyle risks, your chances of contracting heart disease will be the same as that of a man your age."

The good news: Research has shown that 82 per cent of heart disease can be prevented through lifestyle changes. To find out exactly what you should do to keep a healthy ticker, we approached the country's leading cardiologists and medical experts for their advice.

♥ *"Stress increases your risk of heart attacks."*

— DR LIM ING HAAN, CONSULTANT CARDIOLOGIST,
TAN TOCK SENG HOSPITAL

Stress, a by-product of life, can take a toll on everything from your mood and attitude to your relationships. Left unmanaged, it can cause several physical changes in the body that can lead to cardiovascular diseases, says Dr Lim. "Stress decreases nitric oxide and antioxidant levels in our body. These are factors associated with the stiffening of blood vessels, which may lead to hypertension and heart attacks," adds Dr Lim. In addition, stress also breaks down your immune system. This makes you more susceptible to illness, which forces your heart to work harder.

Stress also causes your heart rate to quicken and your breathing to become more shallow. For example, during episodes of panic attacks, rapid breathing can result in the lungs blowing off more carbon dioxide than normal, says Dr Lim. This results in an increased alkaline content of the blood that may lead to numbness or spasm of the small muscles in the hands and feet, also known as carpedal spasm.

On the other hand, when you learn to control your stress and practise deep

breathing, you'll trigger the release of chemicals in the body that are associated with relaxation. Stress also kick-starts poor habits, such as smoking or turning to food for comfort. Learning to cope can negate these effects. Other than the usual stress-busters like striking a work-life balance, exercising regularly, picking up a hobby and getting enough rest, Dr Lim also recommends taking a vacation at least once a year. Practise relaxation techniques like meditation and deep breathing, and streamline your life, so that you're concentrating on your top three or four priorities, rather than on a million different things. Lastly, make a list of a few activities that bring you joy — like talking to your best friend or doing a crossword puzzle — and make sure you do one of them for at least 10 minutes a day.

♥ *"Being obese is not the only risk factor of heart disease."*

— DR ANTONO SUTANDAR, CONSULTANT
CARDIOLOGIST, RAFFLES HOSPITAL

It's true that being overweight or obese makes you more likely to develop heart disease or have a stroke. But a recent survey from the Society for Women's Health Research found that almost 36 per cent of women didn't know that even if you eat right and exercise, you can still have dangerously

KEEP A BMI
OF UNDER

23

TO LOWER
YOUR RISK
OF HEART
DISEASE.



Engage in the activities that you enjoy — like chatting with your pal — for at least 10 minutes a day.

unhealthy cholesterol levels. "There are also other factors like diabetes and hypertension which do not have obvious symptoms," says Dr Sutandar.

Of course, this doesn't mean you can ignore the scale, especially if the excess fat is around your waist. "Intra-abdominal fat is metabolically active, which increases your insulin resistance, blood pressure and risk of diabetes, and negatively affects your cholesterol profile," says Dr Sutandar. So keep up the good-for-you habits and maintain a body mass index of under 23, but also pay attention to your other risk factors.

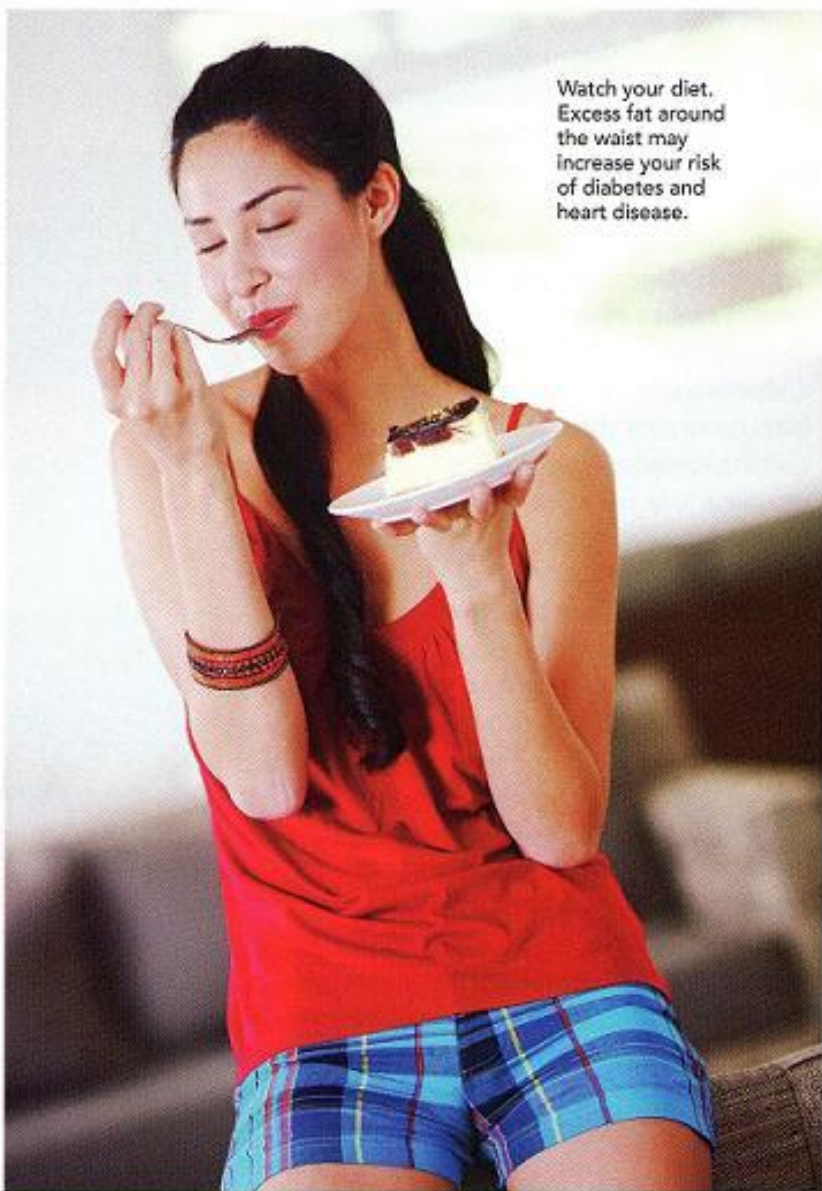
♥ *"Exercise and a healthy diet do not counter the bad effects of cigarettes."*

— DR MICHAEL LIM, CONSULTANT
CARDIOLOGIST AT SINGAPORE HEART,
STROKE AND CANCER CENTRE

There's no wiggle room here: If you light up regularly, your risk of suffering a heart attack is three times greater than that of a non-smoker. Studies also show that smokers who have heart attacks are more likely to die (and suddenly — within an hour). "Nicotine sets off a rush of adrenaline which acts as a stimulant," says Dr Lim. "It speeds up your heart rate and your blood pressure soars, putting extra strain on your heart." In addition, carbon monoxide found in cigarettes robs the body of oxygen, thus making your heart work harder. This can result in heart attacks or a stroke.

Smoking can also lower HDL (high-density lipoprotein, or "good") cholesterol, raise LDL (low-density lipoprotein, or "bad") cholesterol, and make blood platelets stickier, upping the risk of clots. Fortunately, it's never too late to kick the habit. A study from the Kurume University School of Medicine in Japan found that long-time smokers who quit had almost immediate improvements in blood platelet function. "After you quit smoking, your heart will relax and your blood will become thinner and less likely to clot. The inner lining of your arteries will begin to heal, greatly slowing down the build up of plaque," says Dr Lim. "Within two to three years after you stop smoking, your risk of a heart attack will be the same as that of a person who never smoked."

And, no, switching to low-tar or low-nicotine cigarettes won't help as they will not reduce your risk of heart disease. In other words, the sooner you kick the butts, the better.



Watch your diet.
Excess fat around
the waist may
increase your risk
of diabetes and
heart disease.

YOUR RISK
OF HEART
DISEASE
RISES BY
21%
IF YOU
SMOKE AND
ARE ON
THE PILL.

♥ *"You can hurt
your heart while
sleeping."*

— DR KENNY PANG, CONSULTANT
EAR, NOSE AND THROAT (ENT)
SURGEON, PACIFIC SLEEP CENTRE

If you think you sleep like a log, think again. It is estimated that 15 per cent of Singaporeans have sleep apnoea, a potentially life-threatening disease characterised by pauses in breathing that sometimes occur hundreds of times a night without you even realising it. Just a quarter of people who have this sleep disorder know it. "With recurrent episodes of sleep apnoea, the body is deprived of oxygen," says Dr Pang. "This results in a strain on the heart and the brain, resulting in hypertension, ischaemic heart disease and

strokes." Studies have also shown that patients who suffer from obstructive sleep apnoea are two to 2.3 times more likely to experience a heart attack and stroke than a normal patient.

The two signs of sleep apnoea are snoring — which happens when the airway gets forced open — and excessive sleepiness during the day. "In general, you should not feel tired after a normal night's sleep of six to seven hours," says Dr Pang. "If you consistently feel tired after an undisturbed night's rest, you may be suffering from a sleeping disorder like sleep apnoea." It's also time to see your doctor if your bedmate tells you that you snore or gasp for air while you snooze. After discounting other health problems, your GP may then refer you to an ear, nose and throat specialist for a sleep test.

♥ *"Two significant risk factors of heart disease may not have symptoms."*

— DR POH KIAN KEONG, CONSULTANT CARDIOLOGIST, NATIONAL UNIVERSITY HOSPITAL

"For a long time, hypertension was considered to be a silent killer, as the majority of subjects will have no symptoms," says Dr Poh. "Hypertension is a significant risk of stroke, while high cholesterol increases your chances of getting a heart attack," he says. High blood pressure causes your heart to work harder than normal, while unhealthy blood cholesterol can lead to plaque buildup in your arteries.

In a recent Heart Health Awareness survey conducted by the Singapore Heart Foundation, 44 per cent of the respondents believed that they do not have to worry about cholesterol if their blood pressure is under control. This is a misconception, say doctors, as these two risk factors are not necessarily positively proportional to each other. "The most likely reason is that women may not be aware that hypertension and high cholesterol levels are important risk factors for heart attack and stroke," says Dr Poh.

The bottom line: Whether or not you have one or more risk factors for heart disease, it's important to see your primary care physician for a yearly medical check-up, or ask your gynaecologist for a thorough medical examination. For total cholesterol, your levels should be under 200 milligrams per deciliter (mg/dL), with an LDL level less than 130mg/dL, HDL at 40 mg/dL or higher, and triglycerides less than 150 mg/dL. Look for a blood pressure reading of 140/90 or lower.

To ensure that your health is in tip-top shape, see your doctor yearly for a medical check-up.



NEARLY
15%
OF
S'POREANS
SUFFER
FROM SLEEP
APNOEA.

If your doctor doesn't tell you what your blood pressure is during your visit, be sure to ask for specifics. And call to follow up on the results of your blood test — never assume that no news is good news. If your cholesterol level is found to be unhealthy, start making lifestyle changes to bring it down, and then get rechecked in a year. If it falls into the healthy range, you can be tested every five years.

♥ *"Getting help within an hour of a heart attack can save your life."*

— DR GOH PING PING, MEDICAL DIRECTOR, SINGAPORE HEART FOUNDATION AND, ACTING HEAD AND SENIOR CONSULTANT CARDIOLOGIST, CHANGI GENERAL HOSPITAL

During a heart attack, blood supply to the heart muscle is cut off, causing the affected muscle to die. This in turn

causes the heart to fail, says Dr Goh. And the majority of deaths occur within one to two hours after the onset of symptoms, mostly from abnormal heart rhythm, she adds. This is the window period to benefit from clot-busting medication, and other treatments that can open up clogged arteries and restore blood flow before damage is done to the heart muscle. In Singapore, the survival rate is reported to be as low as 2.7 per cent if you have a heart attack outside the hospital.

"Women are more prone to uncommon heart attack symptoms such as breathlessness, nausea, vomiting, breaking out in cold sweats and discomfort in the neck, jaw, or arm. Some even show no symptoms," says Dr Goh. This is especially so for those with diabetes because their nervous system is less sensitive and their ability to feel pain has diminished, she adds.

♥ *"Trans-fat-free food is not necessarily healthy."*

— JACLYN REUTENS, DIETITIAN, APTIMA NUTRITION AND SPORTS CONSULTANTS

In a recent large-scale study done by the Harvard School of Public Health, women who consumed the most trans-fat were found to be one-third more likely to develop heart

2.7%
THE SURVIVAL
RATE IN S'PORE
IF YOU HAVE A
HEART ATTACK
OUTSIDE THE
HOSPITAL.

disease than those who ate the least. But even if a food does not contain trans-fat, we need to look at other nutrients such as mono and polyunsaturated oils, salt, sugar and dietary fibre, says Jaclyn. "A heart-healthy food would be one that is low in total fat and high in dietary fibre," she says.

And with all the buzz about trans-fats, it seems we've almost forgotten about the saturated kind such as coconut and palm oils, which are just as bad for you. After eating food that's high in saturated fat, your arteries may have a tougher time expanding to the increase in blood flow, while your "good" cholesterol may become less effective at removing plaque-causing substances from the arteries, finds a study in the *Journal of the American College of Cardiologists*. So while trans-fats lower "good" cholesterol and raise "bad" cholesterol, the saturated stuff bumps up your bad cholesterol.

To maintain healthy cholesterol levels, you should get less than 10 per cent of your daily calories from saturated fat (that's about 20g, or 180 calories per day, based on a 2,000-calorie diet). However, do note that not all vegetable oils are heart healthy. "Check that the food does not contain partially hydrogenated oils or blended vegetable oils," says Jaclyn. "Instead, choose 100 per cent canola, olive, sunflower, corn, peanut or safflower oil."



Use your family's medical history to assess your risk of heart disease.



One or two hours of exercise a week reduces the risk of heart disease by 27 per cent.

♥ "Exercise helps you live longer."

— DR BALDEV SINGH,
CONSULTANT CARDIOLOGIST,
MOUNT ALVERNIA MEDICAL
CENTRE

Your main motivation for hitting the treadmill or swimming laps may be to shed those unwanted kilos, but it's important to know that even if the needle on the scale stays put, you're still helping your heart. "Exercise benefits the heart by reducing the risk factors, such as high blood pressure and high cholesterol levels, which cause heart attacks," says Dr Singh. "Also, exercise reduces the heart rate. This makes the heart more efficient, and more capable of tolerating physical demands," he says.

In a recent study of more than 27,000 women at the Harvard Medical School, researchers found that as few as one to two hours of moderate physical activity per week reduced the risk of heart disease by 27 per cent. Two to five hours of exercise per week resulted in a 32-per-cent decrease, and more than five hours caused a reduction of 41 per cent. Meanwhile, any changes in the women's body mass index only lowered the risk of developing heart disease by 10 per cent. "A sedentary life style is, by itself, an independent risk factor for the development of coronary heart disease," says Dr Singh. "Regular aerobic exercise such as walking, slow jogging, swimming or cycling at least three or four times a week for at least 20 or 30 minutes each time is highly recommended," he says.

64%
OF WOMEN
WHO DIE
SUDDENLY OF
CORONARY
HEART
DISEASE HAVE
NO PREVIOUS
SYMPTOMS.

♥ "Your eyes can reveal your heart health risk."

— DR SEOW SWEE CHONG, VOLUNTEER DOCTOR,
SINGAPORE HEART FOUNDATION AND CARDIOLOGIST,
NATIONAL UNIVERSITY HOSPITAL

Even if your vision is fine, you need to make sure your primary care physician checks your eyes during your annual medical check-up. There are signs in your peepers which may point towards elevated cholesterol levels, diabetes, thyroid disease and Wilson's disease, which are associated with heart problems," says Dr Seow. For example, fatty streaks or spots around the eye or a whitish ring on the inner margin of the dark part of the eye signify a high cholesterol level. Protruding eyes (proptosis) may be a sign of thyroid disease which can cause heart rhythm disorders and heart failure, says Dr Seow.

All GPs are able to conduct eye checks for you, says Dr Seow. And for those with diabetes or high blood pressure, an eye check is mandatory during your annual check-up. If you haven't been to your doctor in a while or don't feel comfortable asking for this check-up, make an appointment with an ophthalmologist or optometrist to voice your concerns instead. "An optometrist is not specifically trained to screen for heart disease or its risk factors, but an alert one may be able to spot some of these clues and direct the patient to a doctor for further assessment," says Dr Seow.

♥ "Your sibling's heart health is related to your own."

— DR ONG HEAN YEE, CONSULTANT CARDIOLOGIST,
ALEXANDRA HOSPITAL

There are two reasons why your sibling's heart health can be related to you, says Dr Ong. "Firstly, both of you share at least 50 per cent of the same genes. Secondly, both of you are likely to be exposed to and share the same risk factors such as unhealthy eating habits and lifestyle," he says.

There are several studies which show that regardless of lifestyle factors or age, your odds of developing coronary heart disease increase significantly if you have a sibling who has experienced it. And the younger your sibling is at the time of diagnosis, the more your risk rises. "If your siblings have diabetes, high cholesterol levels or high blood pressure, chances are that you will suffer from them as well. Get it checked out if that's the case," says Dr Ong. As such, encourage your family to go for annual check-ups and ask them about their readings to assess your risk.