

Your Health

 Health Partners

FEBRUARY 2024 NEWSLETTER



& HEART & HEALTH & CANCER AWARENESS

*plus we look at
alternative therapies*

In this issue of *Your Health*, our focus is on how to maintain a healthy heart and reduce our risk of cardiovascular disease.

We also take a look at cancer – what different kinds there are, the treatments associated with them and how lifestyle behaviours can sometimes be changed to reduce our overall risk of cancer – and we take a deep dive into alternative therapies, especially for helping manage mental health issues, such as stress and anxiety.



Heart Health

There are currently around 7.6 million people in the UK living with heart and circulatory conditions – such as angina, stroke or vascular dementia – and more than half of us will experience a circulatory condition during our lifetime.

However, making small changes to our daily routine can make a big difference to our heart health, which could, in the long term, help reduce our risk of disease or ill health.

The human heart is about the size of a fist and sits in the middle of the chest, slightly to the left. It is the muscle at the centre of our circulation system, pumping blood around our body as it beats.

This blood sends oxygen and nutrients to all parts of the body and carries away unwanted carbon dioxide and waste products.

There are four chambers that make up the heart: two on the left side and two on the right. The two small upper chambers are called the atria; the two larger lower chambers are the ventricles.

These left and right sides of the heart are separated by a wall of muscle called the septum.

The heart pumps blood around the body

all the time – about five litres (eight pints). This is called circulation. And together, the heart, blood and blood vessels make up our cardiovascular system.

The right side of the heart receives blood that is low in oxygen, because most has been used up by the brain and body. It pumps this to our lungs, where it picks up a fresh supply of oxygen. The blood then returns to the left side of the heart, ready to be pumped back out to the brain and the rest of the body.

Blood is pumped around our body through a network of blood vessels – these are able to widen or narrow depending on how much blood each part of our body requires. This action is partly controlled by hormones.

The four chambers of the heart have four valves, which act like gates, keeping the

“[Our] blood sends oxygen and nutrients to all parts of the body.”

blood moving in the right direction. For our heart to keep pumping regularly, it needs electrical signals which are sent to the heart muscle telling it when to contract and relax.

BLOOD PRESSURE

This is the measurement of the pressure within the arteries. It plays a vital role in the way the heart delivers fresh blood to all our

blood vessels.

For blood to travel throughout the body quickly enough, it has to be under pressure. This is created by the relationship between three things:

- ▶ Our heart’s pumping action;
- ▶ The size and elasticity of our blood vessels;
- ▶ The thickness of the blood itself.

One heartbeat is a single cycle in which the heart contracts and relaxes to pump blood. At rest, a normal heart beats approximately 60 to 100 times every minute, and it increases when you exercise.

To ensure an adequate blood supply around our body, the four chambers of the heart have to pump regularly and in the right sequence.

HEART DISEASE

Cardiovascular disease

Cardiovascular disease (CVD) is a general term for conditions affecting the heart or blood vessels. It is usually associated with a build-up of fatty deposits inside the arteries (atherosclerosis) and an increased risk of blood clots.

It can also be associated with damage to arteries in organs such as the brain, heart, kidneys and eyes.

CVD is one of the main causes of death and disability in the UK, but it can often largely be prevented by leading a healthy lifestyle.

There are many different types of CVD, with four of the main types being described in detail below.

Coronary heart disease

Coronary heart disease occurs when the flow of oxygen-rich blood to the heart muscle is blocked or reduced. This puts an increased strain on the heart and can lead to several serious conditions:

- ▶ **Angina:** Chest pain caused by restricted blood flow to the heart muscle;
- ▶ **Heart attacks:** Where the blood flow to the heart muscle is suddenly blocked;
- ▶ **Heart failure:** Where the heart is unable to pump blood around the body properly.



The main symptoms of a stroke or TIA can be remembered with the word FAST, which stands for:

- ▶ **Face:** The face may have drooped on one side, the person may be unable to smile, or their mouth or eye may have dropped;
- ▶ **Arms:** The person may not be able to lift both arms and keep them there because of arm weakness or numbness in one arm;
- ▶ **Speech:** Their speech may be slurred or garbled, or they may not be able to talk at all;
- ▶ **Time:** It's time to dial 999 immediately if you see any of these signs or symptoms.

Peripheral arterial disease

Peripheral arterial disease occurs when there's a blockage in the arteries to the limbs, usually the legs.

This can cause:

- ▶ Dull or cramping leg pain, which is worse when walking and gets better with rest;
- ▶ Hair loss on the legs and feet;
- ▶ Numbness or weakness in the legs;
- ▶ Persistent ulcers (open sores) on the feet and legs.

“Remember FAST: Face, Arms, Speech and Time”

Strokes and TIAs

A stroke is where the blood supply to part of the brain is cut off, which can cause brain damage and sometimes be fatal.

There are two causes of stroke:

- ▶ **Ischaemic:** Where the blood supply is stopped because of a blood clot, accounting for 85% of all cases;
- ▶ **Haemorrhagic:** Where a weakened blood vessel supplying the brain bursts. This is sometimes called a brain bleed or a brain haemorrhage. The blood leaks into the brain

tissue at high pressure, killing brain cells and causing brain swelling. Find out more [here](#).

There is also a related condition called a transient ischaemic attack (TIA), where the blood supply to the brain is temporarily interrupted. It is what's known as a 'mini-stroke'.

A mini-stroke can last a few minutes or persist up to 24 hours. TIAs should be treated urgently as they are often a warning sign that you are at risk of having a full stroke in the near future.

Act FAST on stroke

The infographic consists of four panels, each with an illustration and a corresponding letter in a red circle:

- F:** Illustration of a person with a red arrow pointing down to their face. Below the circle: **FACE:** Face Drooping
- A:** Illustration of a person with one arm raised. Below the circle: **ARMS:** Cannot Raise Arms
- S:** Illustration of a person with a speech bubble containing tangled lines. Below the circle: **SPEECH:** Slurred/Garbled
- T:** Illustration of a hand holding a smartphone displaying '999'. Below the circle: **TIME:** Time to call 999

Aortic diseases

Aortic diseases are a group of conditions affecting the aorta. The aorta is the largest blood vessel in the body, carrying blood from the heart to the rest of the body.

One of most common aortic diseases is an aortic aneurysm, where the aorta becomes weakened and bulges outwards. This doesn't usually have any symptoms, but there's a chance it could burst and cause life-threatening bleeding. All men aged 65 are invited to attend abdominal aortic aneurysm screening.

Causes of CVD

The exact cause of CVD isn't clear, but there are many things that can increase your risk of getting it, which we call "risk factors". The more risk factors you have, the greater your chances of developing CVD.

In England, if you are over 40, you'll be invited by your GP for an NHS Health Check every five years (we advise you to check your country's health service if you live elsewhere). Part of this check involves assessing your individual CVD risk and advising you how to reduce it if necessary.

The main risk factors for CVD are:

- ▶ **High blood pressure (hypertension):** Your blood pressure is too high, which can damage your blood vessels;
- ▶ **Smoking and other tobacco use:** The harmful substances in tobacco can damage and narrow your blood vessels;
- ▶ **High cholesterol:** Cholesterol is a fatty substance found in the blood – if you have high cholesterol, it can cause your blood vessels to narrow and increase your risk of developing a blood clot;
- ▶ **Diabetes:** Diabetes is a lifelong condition that causes your blood sugar level to become too high. High blood sugar levels can damage the blood vessels, making them more likely to become narrowed. Many people with type 2 diabetes are overweight or obese, which is also a risk factor for CVD;
- ▶ **Inactivity:** If you don't exercise regularly,



it's more likely that you'll have high blood pressure, high cholesterol levels and be overweight. Exercising regularly will help keep your heart healthy. When combined with a healthy diet, exercise can also help you maintain a healthy weight;

- ▶ **Being overweight or obese:** You're at an increased risk of CVD if your body mass index (BMI) is 25 or above (online BMI healthy weight calculators can help you to work out your BMI); if you're a man with a waist measurement of 94cm (about 37 inches) or more; or if you're a woman with a waist measurement of 80cm (about 31.5 inches) or more;

- ▶ **Family history of CVD:** If you have a family history of CVD, your risk is also increased. You're considered to have a family history of CVD if your father or brother were diagnosed with CVD before they were 55

“The main risk factor for cardiovascular disease is high blood pressure (hypertension).”

or if your mother or sister were diagnosed with CVD before they were 65. Tell your doctor or nurse if you have a family history of CVD. They may suggest checking your blood pressure and cholesterol level;

- ▶ **Ethnic background:** In the UK, CVD is more common in people of south Asian, African or Caribbean background. This is because people from these backgrounds


are more likely to have other risk factors for CVD, such as high blood pressure or type 2 diabetes;

- ▶ **Other factors:** Additional factors that affect your risk of developing CVD include age, gender, diet and alcohol intake.

Preventing CVD

A healthy lifestyle can lower your risk of CVD. If you already have CVD, staying as healthy as possible can reduce the chances of it getting worse.

Ways you can reduce your CVD risk:

- ▶ Stopping smoking;
- ▶ Having a healthy, balanced diet;
- ▶ Exercising regularly (adults are advised to do at least 150 minutes of moderate activity a week, such as cycling or brisk walking. If you find it difficult to do this, start at a level you feel comfortable with and gradually increase the duration and intensity of your activity as your fitness improves. Visit your GP for a health check if you haven't exercised before or you're returning to exercise after a long break);
- ▶ Maintaining a healthy weight with a BMI of below 25;
- ▶ Cutting down on alcohol (if you drink alcohol, try not to exceed the recommended limit of 14 alcohol units a week for men and women; if you do drink this much, you should aim to spread your drinking over three days or more);
- ▶ Medication (if you have a particularly high risk of developing CVD, your GP may recommend taking medication to reduce your risk. Medications that may be recommended include statins to lower blood cholesterol levels, low-dose aspirin to prevent blood clots and tablets to reduce blood pressure – but all of these need to be prescribed by your GP). 

Sources

NHS, BHF, WHO, Public Health England, Stroke.org

Cancer Awareness

Cancer is a generic term for a large group of diseases that can affect any part of the body, characterised by the uncontrolled growth and spread of abnormal cells. These abnormal cells form tumours or invade surrounding tissues, disrupting the normal functioning of organs and systems. Cancer is a significant public health issue and is a leading cause of death worldwide, accounting for nearly 10 million deaths in 2020, or nearly one in six deaths. Within the UK, one in four deaths in the UK in 2020 were caused by cancer.

There are various types of cancer, each with its unique characteristics and treatment options – the most common types include breast cancer, lung cancer, prostate cancer, colorectal cancer and skin cancer.

Risk factors

A large percentage (38%) of cancers can be prevented by avoiding risk factors and implementing existing evidence-based prevention strategies.

Cancer development is influenced by a combination of genetic, environmental and lifestyle factors. While some risk factors are completely uncontrollable, such as age and family history, many others can be addressed to reduce the risk of developing cancer.

General risk factors for cancer include the following:

- ▶ **Age:** The risk of developing cancer increases as you get older;
- ▶ **Lifestyle factors:** These include smoking, your weight, your diet, how active you are,

sun exposure and sunbed use and how much alcohol you drink;

- ▶ **Family history:** Some cancers are more common in some families.

Changing your lifestyle behaviours can help reduce your overall risk – here are some of the most important ones:

- ▶ **Giving up smoking:** Smoking is the biggest cause of cancer in the UK. It causes 15 in every 100 cancers, and over 70 in 100 lung cancers are caused by smoking. Giving up smoking is the single most important thing you can do for your health;
- ▶ **Keep to a healthy weight:** After smoking, overweight and obesity are the second biggest causes of cancer. They increase the risk of many cancer types, including cancers of the bowel, kidney, womb, and



“Changing your lifestyle behaviours can help reduce your overall risk.”

gullet (oesophagus). Excessive adipose (fat) tissue can create environments where cancer cells can thrive, due to chronic inflammation, hormone imbalance and impaired function, as well as suppression of the immune system;

- ▶ **Limit how much alcohol you drink:** Drinking alcohol increases your risk of mouth and throat cancers. It is also linked to cancers of the gullet (oesophagus), bowel, liver and breast. There is no safe level of drinking alcohol but sticking to the recommended guidelines reduces the risk of damaging your health;
- ▶ **Eat a healthy diet:** There is no single food that causes or prevents cancer but try to limit how much red and processed meat you eat as these are linked to a higher risk of bowel and prostate cancer;
- ▶ **Be physically active:** Lack of regular physical activity is associated with a higher risk of certain cancers, primarily due to the increased risk of becoming overweight;
- ▶ **Take care in the sun:** Spending some time outside helps you stay healthy as our bodies need sunlight to make vitamin D, but it is important to protect your skin from





too much sun. This is because too much sun can increase your risk of skin cancer. Using sunbeds or sunlamps also increases your risk of skin cancer;

▶ **Workplace and environmental factors:**

Exposure to certain chemicals, radiation and carcinogens in the workplace or environment can increase cancer risk;

▶ **Viral infections:** A small number of viruses have been linked to a higher risk of certain types of cancer. These viruses include:


- ▶ Human papilloma virus (HPV), which increases the risk of cervical cancer and is linked to cancers of the head and neck, anus, vulva, vagina and penis;
- ▶ Hepatitis B and C, which are linked to liver cancer;
- ▶ HIV, which can increase the risk of cancers including lymphoma and sarcoma.

Get screened when you are invited. There are many screenings that are effective in identifying cancers, including breast, bowel, prostate and cervical, so don't wait!

The cancer burden can also be reduced

through early detection of cancer, and the appropriate treatment and care of patients who develop cancer. Many cancers have a high chance of cure if diagnosed early and treated appropriately.

It is essential to remember that having one or more risk factors does not guarantee that an individual will develop cancer, and vice versa—some individuals without any apparent risk factors may still develop cancer.

If an individual is living with several uncontrollable risk factors, it is important to moderate risk by living a healthy lifestyle, in combination with regular health screenings and early detection. 

Resources:

- Macmillan Cancer Support
- Cancer Research UK
- Cancer (who.int)

Alternative Therapies

In today's fast-paced world, the quest for good mental health and emotional wellbeing is more vital than ever. Many people seek alternative therapies as valuable additions or alternatives to conventional treatments.

Complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) is treatment that falls outside of mainstream healthcare. Please always ensure you liaise carefully with your GP for any serious health concerns.

Let's shed some light on the top alternative therapies available in the UK and their potential benefits for various mental health issues.

The rising popularity of alternative therapies

Alternative therapies have been steadily gaining popularity in the UK and around the world. This trend can be attributed to several factors, including dissatisfaction with traditional approaches, a desire for holistic wellbeing and a growing recognition of the mind-body connection.

Yoga and mindfulness meditation

Yoga and mindfulness meditation are ancient practices that focus on the mind-body connection. Yoga combines physical postures, breathing exercises and meditation

techniques, while mindfulness meditation emphasises being present in the moment. **Benefits:** Yoga and meditation are widely recognised for their effectiveness in reducing stress, anxiety and depression. They promote relaxation, improve mental clarity and enhance self-awareness. Yoga also contributes to physical health through increased flexibility and strength.

Ideal for: Individuals struggling with stress, anxiety disorders and those seeking to enhance their overall mental and physical wellbeing.

Acupuncture

Acupuncture is an alternative therapy rooted in traditional Chinese medicine. It involves the insertion of thin needles into specific points on the body to stimulate energy flow.

Benefits: Acupuncture is known for alleviating chronic pain, reducing stress and promoting relaxation. It can also be beneficial for individuals dealing with insomnia, migraines and post-traumatic stress disorder. You can read more about acupuncture [here](#).

Ideal for: Those seeking pain relief, stress reduction and improved sleep quality.



Aromatherapy

Aromatherapy uses essential oils extracted from plants to promote physical and emotional wellbeing. These oils are typically inhaled or applied topically.

Benefits: Aromatherapy can be a potent tool for managing anxiety, improving mood and enhancing relaxation. Certain scents, such as lavender and chamomile, are particularly soothing.

Ideal for: People dealing with stress, anxiety and mood disorders.



“Aromatherapy can be a potent tool for managing anxiety.”



Art Therapy

Art therapy involves creative expression, often through drawing, painting or sculpture, to explore emotions and process trauma.

Benefits: Art therapy provides a non-verbal means of communication, making it ideal for individuals who struggle to express their feelings verbally. It can aid in processing trauma, reducing anxiety and boosting self-esteem.

Ideal for: Those with a history of trauma, PTSD or who have difficulty expressing emotions through words.



Hypnotherapy

Hypnotherapy uses guided relaxation techniques to induce a trance-like state in which the therapist can suggest positive changes in behaviour, thoughts or feelings.

Benefits: Hypnotherapy is effective for addressing various issues, including smoking cessation, weight management and overcoming phobias. It can also help with managing chronic pain and reducing stress.

Ideal for: Individuals looking to break habits, conquer fears or manage pain.



Why Choose Alternative Therapies?

There are several compelling reasons why alternative therapies are gaining ground as effective treatments for mental health issues.

Holistic approach: Alternative therapies focus on the whole person, considering physical, emotional and spiritual aspects – this holistic approach can lead to a deeper understanding of the root causes of mental health problems.

Minimal side effects: Unlike some medications, alternative therapies typically have minimal or no side effects – this makes them a safer option for those concerned about potential adverse reactions.

Personalised care: Many alternative therapies are tailored to the individual, allowing for

personalised treatment plans that address specific needs and preferences.

Non-Invasive: Most alternative therapies are non-invasive and non-pharmaceutical, making them suitable for people who prefer natural or non-traditional approaches to healing.

Empowerment: Engaging in alternative therapies often empowers individuals to take an active role in their wellbeing – this sense of control can be especially valuable in managing mental health.



Many people use alternative therapies in conjunction with traditional treatments – this complementary approach can enhance overall wellbeing and symptom management.

As the demand for alternative therapies continues to rise in the UK, it's essential to recognise the significant benefits they offer for mental health and wellbeing. Yoga, mindfulness meditation, acupuncture, aromatherapy, art therapy and hypnotherapy are just a few examples of these potent tools. Whether you're seeking relief from stress, anxiety, depression or chronic pain, alternative therapies can provide a holistic and personalised path to healing.

Remember that it's crucial to consult with qualified practitioners and healthcare professionals when considering alternative therapies, as they can help you create a well-rounded approach to your mental health.

Ultimately, the power to heal and find balance within yourself may lie in the embrace of these alternative therapies,


paving the way for a healthier and more harmonious life.

It is also worth noting that alternative therapies have different amounts of research and therefore reliability of effect can greatly differ.

For example, there is a strong evidence base for the benefits of yoga but very little evidence to support the benefits of aromatherapy.

Secondly, it is important to note that these alternative therapies are not regulated professions, which means that anyone can call themselves an art therapist or offer acupuncture. Therefore, the quality of treatment varies, and you should always check people's training and qualifications.

Whilst the evidence base may be lacking due to the low volume of research into these areas, there are some excellent alternative therapies and therapists to consider.

If you decide to access alternative therapies, particularly when they are costly, make sure you sound them out and check their qualifications and experience. 

NEXT ISSUE:

- Neurodiversity Celebration
- Nutrition & Fermented Food
- Sleep

At Health Partners we offer a full range of tailored health and wellbeing services.

Our thinking is innovative. We constantly develop new responses and tools designed to address the health and wellbeing challenges that face your business and people.

Our commitment is total. We invest in our services, creating new ones and keeping in step with every client. We constantly explore new ways of working and make no compromises in the quality of our services.

Simply put, we are here to help people be their best.