

Check your heart for health

Castlemaine Health
physiotherapist Melissa Wade
and cardiac rehabilitation
coordinator Antoinette
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Current research shows that a staggering, one-fifth of Australians aged 45 - 74 years are at high risk of having a heart attack or stroke in the next five years.

This Heart Week (April 28 - May 4) The Heart Foundation is focusing on the importance of heart health checks in reducing the risk.

In an announcement made earlier this month in response to new government funding to update the guidelines for the management of cardiovascular disease, National Heart Foundation Acting Group CEO, Graeme Lynch AM said changes would help doctors and policymakers make the best decisions for Australians at risk.

The new guidelines promote heart health checks, which recently received a dedicated interim item number on the Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS).

"As of this week, people 45 years and over, or 30 years and over for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, can see their GP for a Medicare-funded heart health check to find out if they are at risk of a heart attack or stroke in the next five years," Mr Lynch said.

"We believe this initiative has the potential to prevent 76,500 heart events and strokes over the next five years. That's 42 heart events avoided every day," he said.

So what is a heart health check, who should have one and why?

A heart health check is a simple, online checklist that helps determine your level of risk based on a number of factors including your own health, your family history and your lifestyle.

A GP can conduct the check and might also talk to you about what you eat, your level of exercise, your own and your family's health and medical history.

Depending on the results of the online test your GP may also take your blood pressure, check your cholesterol and your Body Mass Index (BMI).

"The test is very easy," says cardiac rehabilitation coordinator at Castlemaine Health, Antoinette O'Shaughnessy.

"Once most people reach about 45 it's worth talking to your GP about having a test, however if you have a family history, or if you are experiencing symptoms it's important to be proactive and get things checked out."

Key signs that you should speak to your GP about a heart health check as a matter of urgency include shortness of breath, feeling more tired and any pain or tightness in the chest.

"Sometimes people think shortness of breath or tiredness is just a normal part of aging or being unfit but it could be a sign that the heart is not functioning as well as it should," says Antoinette.

"When it comes to pain, while tightness or pain in the chest



may be the most recognisable symptom, it's also important to know that women in particular often experience pain in the back, between the shoulder blades, down the arms or even in the jaw, that is referred from the heart."

Once you have your results your GP will make recommendations and referrals. This may include a referral to the cardiac rehabilitation program at Castlemaine Health.

The eight week program, which includes a weekly session of supervised exercise followed by an information session, is open to people who have experienced a heart event, but is also really well suited to someone identified as high risk of experiencing a cardiac event.

"The heart health check measures two types of risks: modifiable and non-modifiable," says Antoinette.

"Non-modifiable risks like family history, your age and a past cardiac event we can't do much about. But risks like smoking, being overweight, having high blood pressure, lack of exercise, diabetes or pre-diabetes and stress, we can really help with."

Information sessions cover everything from the basics of how the heart works to understanding and managing risk factors, managing medications and making sense of dietary information.

Managing mental health and stress is an important focus. "If you're depressed, stressed or anxious, you can actually increase your risk of a cardiac event," says Antoinette.

"People who are depressed are more likely to withdraw socially, smoke, drink and eat the wrong foods and the hormones released when you're stressed or anxious put your heart rate and blood pressure up and increase your rate of clotting. They also push up your risk of obesity and diabetes."

Current research shows clear, long-term benefits to getting up and active as soon as possible after a heart event or a diagnosis.

"Coming to exercise with a nurse and a physio in a hospital helps a lot," says Castlemaine Health physiotherapist, Melissa Wade.

"After a heart event or a diagnosis people often used to go home and not do anything physical for the rest of their life because they were scared. Inactivity is a serious risk factor in another heart event so getting up and moving is really important," she says.

"We try and get rid of that fear. Getting people to exercise who've never exercised in their life and seeing the changes it can make is one of the joys of my job."

If you think you or someone you know could benefit from attending the cardiac rehabilitation program speak to your GP about a referral or contact the Community Rehabilitation Centre at Castlemaine Health on 5471 3575.

Q&A

Q: How can my family history affect my level of risk?

A: A family history of genetic hypertension, genetic hypercholesterolaemia, diabetes, anxiety or depression may put you at a higher risk of having these conditions and as a result, put you at a higher risk of having a heart attack or stroke. Your GP will talk to you about this in more detail during your heart health check.

Q: What can I do now to improve my heart health?

A: Having a healthy lifestyle is important. You can make positive changes by improving your diet, being active, quitting smoking and reducing your alcohol intake to improve your heart health.

Q: What type of exercise should I be doing for heart health?

A: For general heart health, anything aerobic for 30 minutes most days of the week is ideal. Walking, swimming, cycling and dancing are all great. You want your breathing rate to be up. Choose something you like, that you can stick with. Build your activity up gradually and work with your GP or health professional.



One-fifth of Australians

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