

Help for the heart

The Health Column

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Nearly everyone will be affected by cardiovascular disease at some point in their lives. Whether you or someone close to you develops cardiovascular disease, knowing what you can do to get help for the heart is important.

Cardiovascular disease includes all diseases and conditions of the heart and blood vessels. The main cause of cardiovascular disease in Australia is atherosclerosis, an abnormal build-up of fat and other substances which form plaque inside the arteries. Atherosclerosis may be present but without symptoms for years however, the ultimate consequences can be debilitating and even life-threatening, such as heart attack and stroke.



The main types of cardiovascular disease in Australia are:

- Coronary heart disease
- Stroke
- Heart failure and cardiomyopathy
- Acute rheumatic fever and rheumatic heart disease
- Peripheral vascular disease
- Congenital heart disease

Other heart conditions include cardiac arrhythmias such as atrial and ventricular fibrillation.

According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, and based on data from the 2007–08 National Health Survey, an estimated 17% of the Australian population (3.4 million people) had cardiovascular disease. The prevalence is spread similarly across males and females. While only 10% of those aged 35–44 years have cardiovascular disease, this jumped to 70% of those aged 85 years or over.

Blood pressure is the pressure of blood against blood vessel walls. We all need to maintain normal blood pressure to stay alive, but blood pressure higher than normal can be dangerous. Most people with high blood pressure have no symptoms and feel well. The only way to find out if your blood pressure is higher than normal is to measure it – your pharmacist or doctor can do this for you.

High blood pressure (or hypertension) is a major risk factor for heart disease and stroke. It is the cause of more death and disease than any other risk factor. Blood pressure can be elevated by lifestyle factors, such as too much salt and fat in the diet, being overweight/obese, drinking too much alcohol, and stress. By lowering blood pressure, absolute cardiovascular risk is reduced. Medicines can help to control, but cannot cure, high blood pressure.

Risk factors for heart disease include smoking, diabetes, obesity, family history and age. By following a healthy lifestyle and taking medicines as prescribed, you can reduce your absolute risk of developing cardiovascular disease.

Your local pharmacy is your health destination. There are many products and services available in pharmacies which can help with cardiovascular disease and its prevention. These include:

- Cardiovascular disease services such as blood pressure monitoring and atrial fibrillation monitoring.
- Pharmacists can conduct screening and risk assessment services and assess your absolute cardiovascular risk. Depending upon the pharmacist's findings you may be referred to your doctor for further risk assessment and diagnosis.
- Diabetes management services.
- Products and services to help you quit smoking.
- Weight loss services and products.
- Blood pressure monitors for home use.
- Reviews of your current medicine regimen.
- Personalised services to help you better manage taking your medicine.
- Health information and advice on diet/lifestyle.

Visit your local pharmacy to find out how they can help you prevent, monitor and control cardiovascular disease.

Pharmacies providing the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia's Self Care health information have a range of helpful Fact Cards including *Exercise and the Heart*, *Fat and Cholesterol*, and *High Blood Pressure*.

For the nearest Self Care pharmacy location phone the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia on 1300 369 772, or go to www.psa.org.au 'Supporting practice' then 'Self Care', and then 'Find a Self Care pharmacy'.