

## **AMIAN HEALTH & WELLBEING - FEBRUARY 2017**

- **HEALTHY HEART MONTH**

(How to maintain a healthy heart and dealing with High Blood Pressure)

- **THE GREAT SNACKING DEBATE**

- **THE INFORMATION DIET – UNPLUG TO DESTRESS**



## FEBRUARY IS HEALTHY HEART MONTH

This year's 'Heart Month' focuses on making small changes towards a healthier lifestyle.

### Healthy Eating

A healthy diet can help reduce your risk of developing coronary heart disease and stop you gaining weight, reducing your risk of diabetes and high blood pressure.

It can also help lower your cholesterol levels and reduce your risk of some cancers.

Even if you already have a heart condition, a healthy diet can benefit your heart.

#### A Balanced Diet

Everyone should aim for a well balanced diet. Faddy crash diets may not provide the balance of nutrients you need.

The best way to understand it is to think of foods in food groups.

Try to eat:

- plenty of fruit and vegetables
- plenty of starchy foods such as bread, rice, potatoes and pasta. Choose wholegrain varieties wherever possible
- some milk and dairy products
- some meat, fish, eggs, beans and other non-dairy sources of protein
- only a small amount of foods and drinks high in fats and/or sugar
- Choose options that are lower in fat, salt and sugar whenever you can

## Staying Active

Physical activity can help reduce your risk of heart disease. It can also help you control your weight, reduce blood pressure and cholesterol and improve your mental health – helping you to look and feel great.

### Time to get going

Being active doesn't always have to mean jogging or aerobics – gentle, everyday activities like walking, gardening and climbing stairs are great ways to get started.

- Make small changes like walking rather than driving, and taking the stairs instead of the lift or escalator.
- Take a walk every day – to work, to the shop, or to see a friend.
- Set a date and take your kids, grandkids, pets or friends to the park.
- Remember – every ten minutes counts.

### Time to push it

The type of activity that helps your heart most will make you feel warmer, breathe harder and make your heart beat faster than usual.

- Set aside some time in your week for activities like brisk walking, jogging, cycling, swimming, exercise classes or team sports like football or netball.
- Aim to work up to at least 150 minutes of this type of activity a week. You can spread this out over the week however you like.
- Remember – every ten minutes counts.

## Stress

Stress is not a direct risk factor for cardiovascular disease, but it's possible that it may contribute to your risk level. It all depends on your coping mechanisms.

Some people cope with stress with risky behaviour – such as smoking, drinking too much alcohol and overeating.

All of these increase your risk of cardiovascular disease.

## How does stress affect the heart?

There is no evidence to suggest that stress causes coronary heart disease or heart attacks.

But if you have coronary heart disease and experience feelings of anxiety or are under lots of stress, it may bring on symptoms like angina.

## What you can do

Changing your lifestyle in a positive way can help you feel better able to cope with some of the demands put on you. A balanced diet and regular physical activity will help you cope with stress.

If you often feel stressed or anxious, it's important to learn how to relax.

Some people find that physical activity, yoga or other relaxation techniques can help. You could make a list of things that help you to relax and schedule one every day.

You may need to identify situations that make you feel stressed at home or at work and try to avoid them if you can.

You could also learn techniques for managing stress. If you think you are stressed or very anxious, contact **AMIAN** who will be able to help you decide on the best way to deal with it.

**This service is completely confidential and is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. The service is available to all Bolton University employees. Tel: 01204 418183 / 07872 423 088; Email: [info@amianltd.co.uk](mailto:info@amianltd.co.uk)**

## Heart and Mental Health

Your heart health and mental health are closely connected. Research has shown that people with severe mental health problems are two to three times more likely to suffer from cardiovascular disease due to medication and lifestyle factors.

### How can I improve my heart health?

You can help lower your risk of cardiovascular disease by making healthy changes to your lifestyle that will benefit your mental, physical and heart health.

#### Eat a healthy diet

Healthy eating can help control your weight, blood pressure and cholesterol levels. It can also help improve your mood and reduce symptoms of depression.

#### Get active

Being physically active can help make your muscles stronger, help you to lose weight and lower your blood pressure. Regular exercise can also boost your mental health. It can ease anxiety and depression and make you sleep better.

#### Stop smoking

Smoking is one of the leading causes of cardiovascular diseases, including coronary heart disease and stroke. Instead of helping you relax, smoking actually increases anxiety and tension and may stop your mental health medication working properly.

#### Cutting down on alcohol

Alcohol changes your mood so you may drink to help you feel better or deal with the symptoms of your mental health problem. Alcohol is a depressant so it can change your mood for the worse very quickly and make your mental health condition worse.

## ABOUT HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE

### What is high blood pressure?

Your heart is a muscle that pumps blood around your body. Blood pressure is the way doctors describe how hard your blood is being pushed through your arteries – the tubes that carry blood from your heart to the rest of your body. High blood pressure –sometimes called hypertension – means that your blood pressure is always higher than it should be.

High blood pressure isn't usually something that you can feel or notice, but if you have it you're more likely to have a heart attack or a stroke. The good news is there are lots of things you can do to help lower your blood pressure so your risk is lower.

### Why am I at risk?

Your heart and brain need oxygen from your blood to work properly. If the tubes that supply your heart muscle or brain with blood (your arteries) get clogged up or blocked with fatty material, less oxygen can get to them. If this happens to your heart muscle, you'll have a heart attack. If this happens and your brain doesn't get enough oxygen, you'll have a stroke.

### So what does high blood pressure have to do with it?

High blood pressure puts extra pressure on the walls of your arteries. Over time this can damage them and means they are more likely to get clogged up – so having high blood pressure means you're much more likely to have a heart attack or stroke. Over time high blood pressure can also cause your heart to get bigger (enlarged) which means it can't pump as well as it should. This can lead to heart failure.

## What should my blood pressure be?

Unless your doctor tells you something different, your blood pressure should be below 140/90 mmHg. So if the first number in your blood pressure reading is over 140 or the second number is over 90, your doctor may tell you that you have high blood pressure. If you have a problem with your heart or the tubes that carry your blood around your body (your blood vessels) like coronary heart disease, diabetes or kidney disease, then your blood pressure should be below 130/80mmHg.

## What does high blood pressure feel like?

Most people can't feel that they have high blood pressure and they only find out when they have their blood pressure checked. But, in some rare cases, someone with very high blood pressure might have:

- Blurred or double vision
- Nosebleeds
- Shortness of breath
- A headache that goes on for a long time

**If you have any of these you should see your doctor as soon as possible**

## Tackling High Blood Pressure

There are some simple things you can do to help lower your blood pressure.

- Eat a diet full of fruit and veg and low in saturated fat and salt.
- Drink less alcohol.
- Be active for at least 150 minutes a week. This activity should make you feel warmer, breathe harder and make your heart beat faster than usual.
- To help keep your risk of a heart attack or stroke as low as possible, you should also quit smoking because smoking can cause your arteries to become clogged up much more quickly.

## Blood Pressure Medication

If your blood pressure is very high, or making changes to your lifestyle doesn't lower it enough, your doctor might suggest that you take medication to control it and lower your risk of having a heart attack or stroke. Because you don't normally feel or notice high blood pressure, it can be easy to forget to take your medication. But because it will help cut your risk, it's very important to take it in the way your doctor tells you. If you're already taking medication for high blood pressure, you should still eat well and be active, to keep your risk of a heart attack or stroke as low as it can be.



## THE GREAT 'SNACKING DEBATE'

When the topic of snacking comes up, you'll probably hear a lot of conflicting advice. Snacking is a big, big topic in the world of nutrition, and it's something that I am constantly asked about. How many snacks should you have each day? What time? What is the go to energy ball recipe for snacking? What are the best snacks for weight loss? Which snacks will fuel my metabolism? It gives me more energy right? Will snacking make me eat less at meal times?



The truth is (brace yourself) you shouldn't really snack. At least not regularly, and certainly not as a rule. We've been conditioned to constantly eat, but most of us spend far too much time thinking about food, eating food, finding food, worrying what will happen if we get hungry, and our poor, overworked stomachs barely have time to process one meal before the next one is thrown at it. The benefits of eating well balanced meals will always trump snacking. So if you're a constant grazer read on...

## **SNACKING & DIGESTION**

Many of us don't know this, but it actually takes a lot of energy to digest food. When we eat, circulation is directed toward the digestive system to fuel the essential processes that needs to occur to break down food. This takes time, and definitely more time than you probably think. After about 2-3 hours, 50% of the food in your stomach has been processed and is moved down into the intestinal track for the next phase of digestion. However, it's not until 4-5 hours that there's a total emptying of the stomach. This time can of course vary. It is generally less time for small/simple meals and more for heavy/complex meals. When you snack, you're adding more food on top of what's already being processed before its finished being processed. This results in lower energy, less nutrient absorption and a slower gastric transit time. It's also monopolising a big portion of our body's energy that could be spent doing other things.

## **SNACKING & WEIGHT LOSS**

A lot of the snacking industry is built around the notion that eating smaller, more frequent meals will fuel your metabolism and help you lose weight. However, it's way more complex than that. Eating causes a release in insulin, which in short delivers energy to our cells. Our cells don't need an endless amount of energy, so if there's any excess then it's sent to be stored in the liver and muscles. If there's still more to spare, it is converted into triglycerides and stored as fat. Once this process is done, insulin drops and the pancreas waits until we eat again to repeat the process. Snacking will keep insulin elevated, and prevents the body from drawing from fat stores. What's more influential than that is that typical snack foods are generally sweet or high in carbohydrate, which will usually just fuel your appetite and perpetuate the insulin cycle.

## HABIT VS NEED

It would be wrong to say that you should never snack. The important thing is to be mindful of why, when and how often you snack. Snacking out of boredom, stress, anxiety or habit is all too common and it gives the body the wrong message. If you are truly hungry, need a boost before exercising or to refuel afterwards, then go for it. You don't need to let yourself get to the point of being ravenous, but equally it's important not to force yourself to snack (especially if you find it difficult to stop!). Always aim to eat good quality meals that are rich in nutrients and fibre. Avoid snacking between breakfast and lunch and if you need something midway to dinner, then try to wait 4+ hours and keep the snack small. But like most topics in nutrition, it can be highly personal and there are, of course, exceptions to the rule. If you're training hard and have little body fat reserves, you'll need more food and want to ensure that you don't breakdown muscle tissue. If you're pregnant, or generally find it challenging to manage your energy, then it's important you assess what your needs and habits are and ensure that you adapt to any underlying factor that could be influencing your appetite. If you find that you tend to snack from sudden crashes in energy, there will most likely be an underlying imbalance in insulin or cortisol that you can address that will help your energy levels be more sustainable.

## SNACKING CHEAT SHEET

- Avoid snacking between breakfast & lunch.
- Try to leave 4-5+ hours between meals & snacks.
- Snacks high in sugar will fuel your appetite and spike insulin.
- When you do snack, always ensure that you're getting a little fat, protein or fibre in your snack.
- It's important to refuel after exercising, so grab a shake or balanced snack/meal after a session to fuel your recovery.
- Do a quick mental check in before you snack - are you hungry or just stressed out?
- Do you find it hard to stop once you start? If so, make sure you don't keep bags of food at your desk or workspace.



## THE INFORMATION DIET – ‘UNPLUG TO DE STRESS’

Wake up, scroll through your feeds; Instagram, Twitter, Facebook? Pop on a podcast or stream Netflix in the background while you make breakfast? Grab a free magazine from the guy outside the tube station and read it on the way to work? Evening Standard crossword on the way home? Dinner in front of the TV? Scroll through you feeds – then bed?

### **Any of the above starting to sound familiar?**

We are in the midst of an information age. Between 3G, smart ads and the computer-based work that dominates most jobs, there is no escaping the constant feed of information. It is infinite and it is readily available. But is this a good thing? Yes and no. Universal access to information makes our lives easier in so many ways. That being said, it also takes its toll. Constantly consuming information contributes to the high levels of stress and anxiety felt by almost everyone these days.

In the same way we choose foods that nourish our body, it is important to become mindful about whether what we're reading/watching/following is nourishing our minds. Here are some ways you can break through the noise and reclaim your headspace.

**Cultivate silence.** How often do we just sit contentedly in perfect silence? Without your phone to occupy your brain or headphones in your ears? If the answer is never, try and carve out little moments of silence. First thing in the morning, try to sit in silence for five or ten minutes, not necessarily meditating or trying to clear your mind of thoughts but instead just being in your body, existing, without distraction. It isn't easy at first but it can be cleansing to feel your mind race at first then, slowly but surely, wind down.

**Minimalize.** Examine exactly how many channels you're subscribed to. Most people are subscribed to approximately fifteen, as well as podcasts, following over 500 people on Instagram, reading at least two books at a time and watching a handful of TV shows. Does it feel like work just keeping up with all this? Is this meant to be relaxing and entertaining? If not, try going through your social media channels, blogs, newspapers and TV schedule and really think about what you look forward to seeing versus what feels like compulsion. And, as they say in yoga, let go of that which is no longer serving you.

**Try a total information cleanse.** This is exactly what it sounds like — take a day, a weekend, even a week and switch off. Ignore your all your feeds; don't even read. This may seem counterintuitive but, much like with eating, it is a great way to alert yourself to which aspects of your media consumption habits are constructive and which aren't. Notice the lightness and airiness in your mind. Become aware of which emotions arise. You may be surprised what you find when you stop trying to constantly fill the space.

**If you enjoy, enjoy it.** If watching *Friends* on a Sunday afternoon feels luxurious and special and good then allow yourself to enjoy it without judgement. Just notice how you feel during and after. A good show or book (or Instagram scroll, for that matter) shouldn't feel like a waste of time. It should feel like a gift to yourself and if you feel like you're wasting your time, notice. But if you feel relaxed and rejuvenated, then don't fight it, accept.

Technology and information access can be a magical thing. It is connective and collaborative and makes our enormous world feel close. Celebrate it and always remember that you can ultimately choose what you consume.

**AMIAN** Counselling and support service provides all Bolton University Staff with unbiased, impartial, independent, free advice and support and is a practical and positive way to help resolve concerns and difficulties. Not all staff accessing our service require counselling, some just need the assistance from someone outside of the situation to help explore possible options and provide advice, support and information.

**The service is completely confidential and is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. The service is available to all employees.**

**If you have any further questions or wish to book an appointment, please do not hesitate to contact **AMIAN**:**

**Tel: 01204 418183 / 07872 423 088**

**Email: [info@amianltd.co.uk](mailto:info@amianltd.co.uk)**

