Cardiovascular disease (CVD) is the most common cause of death in Ireland, accounting for 33% of all deaths. An estimated 30,000 people are living in the community with disabilities as a result of a stroke. This makes stroke the third biggest cause of death in Ireland and the biggest cause of acquired disability.

Around 10,000 people in Ireland die each year from cardiovascular disease, including coronary heart disease, stroke and other circulatory diseases. We all know about the importance of heart health and that, to achieve this, we need to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Our busy schedules, however, don’t always allow for this. With Valentine’s Day approaching, it’s a good time to remind your patients to look after their heart. Good relationships and a healthy love life do actually have cardiovascular benefits for your patient. However, there are a number of ways they can boost their heart health.

The first step for your patients is understanding the risk factors for heart disease. The good news is that some of these risks, like stress and cholesterol, can be managed effectively. We have included a checklist below of the modifiable and non-modifiable risk factors to give your patients a better understanding of lifestyle changes they can make for a healthier heart.

Feeling the strain?

A little stress every now and again is not something to be concerned about. Ongoing and unmanaged stress, however, can cause or exacerbate many serious health problems, including cardiovascular disease. Abdominal breathing, carried out twice a day, is one technique your patients can adopt to stimulate relaxation, lessen tensions in the body and improve their overall sense of wellbeing.

1. Place one hand on your chest and the other on your abdomen. When you take a deep breath in, the hand on the abdomen should rise higher than the one on the chest.

2. After exhaling through the mouth, take a slow deep breath in through your nose and hold it for a count of 7.

3. Slowly exhale through your mouth for a count of 8, gently contracting your abdominal muscles to completely evacuate the remaining air from the lungs.

4. Repeat the cycle 4 times.

Breathing at a rate of one breath every 10 seconds increases Heart Rate Variability (HRV), which has a positive effect on cardiac health.

References:
2. [https://www.scripps.org/news_items/4743-how-love-affects-your-heart](https://www.scripps.org/news_items/4743-how-love-affects-your-heart)
One effective way your patients can reduce their risk of heart disease is to keep their cholesterol at a healthy level. Anyone can have high levels of cholesterol, but it is more likely if you are overweight, drink too much alcohol, have an unhealthy diet or are not very active. To help lower their cholesterol, there are a few lifestyle changes your patients can make:

- Get down to a healthy weight – being overweight means your heart has to work harder to pump blood around the body.
- Eat more Omega-3 fatty acids found in oily fish.
- Good sources of fibre include wholemeal bread, bran and wholegrain cereals.
- Choose low-fat dairy products.
- Choose low-fat spreads made from sunflower or olive oil.
- Eat more fruit and vegetables – at least five portions a day.
- Choose low-fat dairy products.
- Cut down on fatty meats and meat products such as sausages and pies.
# Cardiovascular Risk Factors

## Non-Modifiable Risk Factors:

### Family History

Has a close relative of your patient died of heart disease?

### Gender

Is your patient male?

### Age

If your patient is male, are they over 45?
If your patient is female, are they over 55?

## Modifiable Risk Factors:

### High Cholesterol

### Smoking

### High Blood Pressure

### Obesity

### Lack of Exercise

### Diabetes

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Reference: 1. [https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/health-topics/topics/hd/atrisk](https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/health-topics/topics/hd/atrisk)

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