



**British Heart Foundation**

# Physical activity and your heart

*Information for people with heart disease or high blood pressure, and for their families and friends*



*Produced by  
British Heart Foundation  
14 Fitzhardinge Street  
London W1H 6DH  
Phone: 020 7935 0185  
Website: [www.bhf.org.uk](http://www.bhf.org.uk)  
Registered charity number: 225971*

*Heart information line: 0845 0 70 80 70 for confidential information on a range of issues relating to heart disease*

*This booklet is one of the booklets in the Heart Information Series.  
For a complete list of booklets, see page 26.*

#### *Acknowledgements*

*The British Heart Foundation would like to thank all the GPs, cardiologists and nurses who helped to develop the booklets in the Heart Information Series, and all the patients who commented on the text and design.*

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## *About this booklet*

If you have coronary heart disease or high blood pressure, or if you have just had heart surgery, your hospital doctor, cardiac nurse or GP may already have advised you to do more physical activity.

This booklet explains:

- why physical activity is important for your heart, even if you already have coronary heart disease
- how physical activity affects your heart
- how much activity you should aim to do
- which sorts of activities are best for your heart, and
- how you can safely build up your level of activity.

Physical activity might involve going swimming, doing an exercise class, or playing a sport. But it also includes everyday things such as walking, gardening and climbing stairs. You can gain the benefits of activity from all these types of physical activity.

This booklet is not a substitute for the advice your doctor or cardiologist (heart specialist) may give you based on his or her knowledge of your condition.

## *The good news*

Physical activity is very good news for your heart.

- Physical activity halves the risk of developing coronary heart disease.
- Among people who have heart attacks, those who have been physically active are more likely to survive the heart attack compared with people who have not been active.
- Physical activity as part of a rehabilitation programme reduces the risk of dying after a heart attack.
- Physical activity reduces the risk of having a stroke.
- It helps lower blood pressure.
- It reduces the chance of developing diabetes.
- If you already have diabetes, physical activity can help you to control it.
- It helps you to lose weight if you are overweight.

Physical activity also improves your health in other ways. It can:

- make you feel more energetic
- relieve stress
- lower the risk of osteoporosis (thinning of the bones)

- help you to relax, and
- help older people to stay independent, or become more independent.

The people who benefit the most are inactive people who start to take regular moderate exercise, such as brisk walking, cycling or dancing. Also, there is no particular level of activity that you have to reach before you can benefit – a little activity is better than none! And the benefits will start to come as soon as you start being more active.

You don't have to go to a gym, or play sports, or use special equipment. You can become more active just by working more activity into your everyday life.

Many people who do regular physical activity say that it makes them feel better, and that they notice an improvement in their mood and self-confidence. It can also be sociable and a lot of fun.

## *What causes coronary heart disease?*

Coronary heart disease is caused when the arteries that supply blood to the heart (the coronary arteries) become narrowed by a gradual build-up of fatty material within their walls. This process is called ‘atherosclerosis’ and the fatty material is called ‘atheroma’.

This can cause angina – an uncomfortable feeling in the chest, which may spread to the arms, neck, jaw, back or stomach. Or it may affect just the neck, jaw, arm or stomach. Angina happens when the coronary arteries become so narrow that not enough blood can reach the heart muscle. As a result, the heart muscle does not get enough oxygen – especially when its demands are high, for example when you are exerting yourself.

Coronary heart disease can suddenly become worse if a blood clot forms over the atheroma (a thrombosis). This is what causes a heart attack.

Atherosclerosis develops when the cells in the walls of the coronary arteries take up cholesterol. This

cholesterol is formed mainly from the fats in the foods you eat. Two types of cholesterol are involved:

- LDL cholesterol, which the cells in the coronary artery walls take up to form the atheroma, and
- HDL cholesterol, which removes excess cholesterol from the circulation, and seems to protect against coronary heart disease.

### ‘Risk factors’ for coronary heart disease

A ‘risk factor’ is something which increases people’s risk of getting coronary heart disease. There are several known risk factors for coronary heart disease which you can do something about. The main ones are:

- smoking
- high blood pressure
- high blood cholesterol
- physical inactivity, and
- diabetes.

Other lifestyle factors may also play a part, including drinking too much alcohol, having too much salt, and being overweight or obese.

Physical inactivity is probably the most common risk factor for heart disease in the UK. Surveys have shown that only 3 or 4 in every 10 men, and 2 or 3

in every 10 women in the UK are active enough to give themselves some protection against coronary heart disease.

For more information on the other main risk factors, see our booklets: *Smoking and your heart*, *Blood pressure*, *Reducing your blood cholesterol* and *Diabetes and your heart*.

## *Why is physical activity so important for my heart?*

Researchers are still trying to find out exactly why physical activity plays such an important part in preventing coronary heart disease. It seems to act in the following ways.

**Physical activity helps to lower high blood pressure, and prevent high blood pressure from developing**  
High blood pressure is one of the major risk factors for coronary heart disease (see page 9). In 9 out of 10 people with high blood pressure, there is no single cause of the high blood pressure. However, unhealthy lifestyles play an important part. In particular, being overweight or obese, eating too much salt, drinking too much alcohol, and physical inactivity can all raise blood pressure.

Regular, moderate rhythmic exercise, such as walking, cycling or dancing, helps to reduce blood pressure in people with high blood pressure. This sort of exercise may also prevent high blood pressure from developing.

**It helps you to keep to, or reach, a healthy weight**  
Regular physical activity plays an important part in

reaching, or keeping to, a healthy weight. The amount of activity you do is as important as the food you eat, because being a healthy weight means balancing the energy you take into your body (the calories in your food and drink) with the energy you use up (through activity). People who are overweight are more likely to have high blood pressure and high blood cholesterol levels and so have a greater risk of coronary heart disease.

### **Physical activity helps with diabetes**

If you already have diabetes, physical activity can help you to control it.

Physical activity can also help prevent people from getting diabetes. This is important because men who have diabetes are about three times more likely to get coronary heart disease than those without diabetes, and women with diabetes are about four times more likely to get it.

### **It helps improve your blood cholesterol levels**

Physical activity seems to raise HDL cholesterol (the 'protective' cholesterol), but it does not affect LDL cholesterol levels. To maintain the benefit in HDL cholesterol, you have to make sure that you do regular physical activity.

### **Physical activity helps prevent blood clotting**

A heart attack usually occurs when blood clots form over atheroma in the coronary arteries.

Regular physical activity helps to prevent blood from clotting.

### **It helps after you have had a heart attack**

In people who have had a heart attack, regular physical activity can result in less angina, and an earlier return to work. Stress, depression and anxiety all seem to slow down the speed of recovery after a heart attack. There is some evidence that physical activity may help to improve wellbeing, and so speed up recovery.

## *Is it safe for me to become more active?*

If you already have heart disease, it is important to talk with your hospital doctor, cardiac nurse or GP about the best way to increase your level of physical activity. There are many different ways to be more active and it's important to find activities which are safe and right for you.

You may have already had an ECG (electrocardiogram) exercise test, either on a treadmill or exercise bike. If so, this will help your doctor to work out how much activity you can safely do at first.

### **If you have had a heart attack, or heart surgery**

If you have had a heart attack or heart surgery at some time in the past, ask your doctor how much and what sort of activity you can safely do.

If you have had a heart attack or heart surgery just recently, you may be invited to take part in a cardiac rehabilitation programme. This is a very good way of making sure that you exercise at a

level that is safe for you. For more on this, see page 19.

### **If you have angina**

If you get angina, it is still important to be physically active. However, you should adjust your activity so that it doesn't cause angina or make you too breathless.

### **If you have heart failure**

Heart failure is when the heart does not pump as effectively as it should. If you have heart failure, ask your doctor how much and what sort of activity you can safely do.

### **If you have certain other heart conditions**

Your doctor may advise you not to exercise if you have certain other heart conditions such as aortic stenosis (a narrowing of the heart valve), or hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, or if exercising brings on palpitations.

### **If you have high blood pressure**

People with high blood pressure do benefit from doing regular moderate activity. However, if you have high blood pressure that has not been well controlled, your doctor may advise you to avoid

doing very vigorous activities or competitive sports. This is because these activities could briefly raise your blood pressure to a dangerous level. Moderate intensity activity is the ideal option for most people.

### Sensible precautions

- **It is very important to increase your physical activity gradually.** This means both the amount of time you spend doing it, and how intense the activity is. A sudden increase in physical activity, especially if it is vigorous, can carry risks in middle age. This is because it could bring on angina or possibly, in some people, a heart attack.
- **Warm up and cool down each time you do any physical activity.** Begin slowly for the first few minutes and build up gradually. When you come to the end of your activity, take time to slow down, and make sure you don't stop suddenly.
- If you are doing any activity outdoors in very cold or windy weather, dress warmly, with a hat and a scarf.
- If you get angina, take your GTN spray or tablets with you when you do any physical activity.
- It is not safe to exercise when you have a viral infection (for example, a sore throat) or a temperature.
- Stop exercising if you get any pain, or feel dizzy, sick or unwell, or very tired. If the symptoms don't go away, or if they come back later, see your doctor.

## *What sort of activities are best?*

Different types of physical activity have different health benefits.

The type of exercise that helps your heart the most is called ‘aerobic’ activity. Aerobic activity is any repetitive, rhythmic exercise involving large muscle groups such as the legs, shoulders and arms. Examples of aerobic activity include walking, cycling, swimming and dancing. Aerobic activity increases the body’s demand for oxygen and adds to the workload of the heart and lungs, making the heart and circulation more efficient, and helping to develop your stamina.

Aerobic activity in which the body also bears its own weight – for example, as in walking (but not swimming) – can help to prevent osteoporosis (thinning of the bones).

## What sort of physical activity can I do?

Do	Avoid
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Moderate, rhythmic (aerobic) activity such as brisk walking or cycling.</li><li>● Any regular physical activity that you are used to doing, unless your doctor advises you against it.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Intense activities such as weightlifting, press-ups and heavy digging.</li><li>● Any sport or activity that brings on angina.</li><li>● Moving from floor to standing up too quickly.</li></ul>

## *How should I build up my activity level?*

Whether or not you have a heart condition or high blood pressure, it is very important to increase your physical activity gradually. For more on this, see *Sensible precautions* on page 16.

### **If you have had a heart attack, or heart surgery**

If you have recently had a heart attack or heart surgery, you may be invited to go on a cardiac rehabilitation programme, usually at a local hospital. This will include exercise and activity sessions. It is well worth taking part in the programme, as the medical staff there will plan a programme of activity to suit your needs. You will also be able to ask them questions about the best type of exercise for you, and how intensive it should be. (For more information on these programmes, see our booklet *Heart attack and rehabilitation* or *Having heart surgery*.)

If you have recently had a heart attack, you may be given a *Heart Manual*. This includes a six-week recovery plan as well as relaxation and information

tapes for you and your family. *The Heart Manual* will help you to make progress at home, with phone contact or visits from a member of the cardiac rehabilitation team (the health professionals who will help you during your recovery), or both. Before you leave hospital, a rehabilitation nurse may work out how much exercise you can do, so that they can tailor your rehabilitation to meet your needs.

If you can't follow a hospital-based rehabilitation programme, you may need to make your own plans to become more active. Talk to your doctor or consultant about this. They can help you to work out the best way to increase your activity level and advise you about how much activity it is safe for you to do. To find out if there is a 'community-based' rehabilitation programme in your area (a local programme that is based somewhere other than a hospital), call the Cardiac Care Department of the British Heart Foundation. (The phone number is on the back cover.)

### **If you have angina**

If you have angina, you need to find out how much activity you can manage to do easily without getting chest pain, and then gradually increase the amount.

It may be helpful to plan a weekly exercise programme based on walking. Choose a walking distance and speed that you know you can manage easily without getting angina. Make this your target. Do this amount twice a day for two days. Each time, judge whether the activity was easy or difficult. If it was fairly easy or easy, very gradually increase the distance each day for the next two days. If the activity was difficult, limit yourself to a slower speed or shorter distance until you find it easy.

Make sure that you can do the activity easily before increasing your target. And keep your activity regular and frequent and within, rather than beyond, your limits.

### **If you have heart failure**

If you have heart failure, you need to find out what you can easily do and gradually increase your activity. Don't do so much that you are left feeling exhausted. If you notice that you are getting more breathless than usual, or getting more ankle swelling than usual, stop doing your activity. Ask your doctor about the best type of activity for you, and how much you should be doing, so that you can make sure you are active at a level that is safe and right for you.

### **Physical activity and older people**

Physical activity is good for people of all ages. Many local authorities and community groups run activity programmes for older people. These can help to improve your health and help you to meet other people and have a good time too.

## **If you have high blood pressure that is well controlled, and you don't have heart disease or angina**

Your target is to build up gradually to 30 minutes of moderate intensity activity a day, on at least five days of the week. 'Moderate intensity activity' means any activity that makes you feel warm and slightly out of breath – for example, brisk walking. You can split the 30 minutes into two sessions of 15 minutes, or three sessions of 10 minutes.

### **Building up gradually**

Think about how much physical activity you have done over the past week. You can include brisk walking, or any other activity or exercise that made you feel warm and slightly out of breath. If the total amount of time you spent doing activity at this moderate level is less than 30 minutes a week, then you are 'physically inactive' and need to build up your activity levels gradually but steadily.

*First build more activity into your everyday routine ...*

For example:

- walk to the local shop or post office rather than taking the bus or car
- use the stairs instead of the lift
- get off the bus a stop earlier and then walk, or
- put on a CD or tape and dance to it.

*Then gradually build up your activity level.*

Once you have become a little more active, start thinking about which activities you could do regularly. Suitable activities include brisk walking (see the next page), cycling and dancing. Choose these activities rather than intense exercises such as weightlifting or press-ups.

You may want to involve your partner, family or friends to make it more fun. For more information on ways of building up your activity level, see our booklet *Get active!*

## **Walking**

As with any activity, each time you start walking, begin slowly and build up gradually to the main pace. This is important for safety. (It is a bit like building up speed in a car by going through the gears one at a time. You don't go straight into fourth gear and try to pull away.) Also, when you come to the end of your walk, take time to slow down, and make sure you don't stop suddenly.

### **How do I know if I am walking briskly enough?**

One way of checking if you are walking briskly enough is by doing the 'talk test' while you are walking.

- If you can talk very easily, you are not walking briskly enough.
- If you can talk but you feel warm and are breathing more heavily than normal, you are walking at about the right pace.
- If you can't talk, you are walking too briskly, so you should slow down.

## **Measuring your heart rate**

You may have heard about 'predicted maximum heart rates' and the need to reach a particular heart rate when you are exercising. This may be important for athletes, but is less important for other people. Many of the drugs used to treat heart conditions slow down the heart rate and prevent the heart from responding as it normally would. So, if you are taking medicines, it is not necessary or advisable to focus on your heart rate to find out whether you are exercising at the right pace.

## *For more information*

### **British Heart Foundation website**

**[www.bhf.org.uk](http://www.bhf.org.uk)**

For up-to-date information on the BHF and its services.

### **Heart information line 0845 0 70 80 70**

For confidential information, from the British Heart Foundation, on a range of issues relating to heart disease.

### **Publications and videos**

The BHF produces a range of publications and videos. You can order these through our website. The address is **[www.bhf.org.uk](http://www.bhf.org.uk)**

For a complete publications list and order form, please contact:

British Heart Foundation

PO Box 138

Northampton NN3 6WB.

Phone: 01604 640016

E-mail: [ds-bhf@mail.dataforce.co.uk](mailto:ds-bhf@mail.dataforce.co.uk)

Our publications are free of charge, but we would welcome a donation.

## Heart Information Series

This booklet is one of the booklets in the *Heart Information Series*. The other titles in the series are:

- 1 Physical activity and your heart
- 2 Smoking and your heart
- 3 Reducing your blood cholesterol
- 4 Blood pressure
- 5 Eating for your heart
- 6 Angina
- 7 Heart attack and rehabilitation
- 8 Living with heart failure
- 9 Tests for heart conditions
- 10 Coronary angioplasty and coronary bypass surgery
- 11 Valvular heart disease
- 12 Having heart surgery
- 13 Heart transplantation
- 14 Palpitations
- 15 Pacemakers
- 16 Peripheral arterial disease
- 17 Medicines for the heart
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- 19 Implantable cardioverter defibrillators (ICDs)

So you want to lose weight ... for good. A guide to losing weight for men and women  
Cut the saturated fat from your diet  
Guide to food labelling  
Get active!

### Video – Cholesterol on the level

A video with information on how to reduce your cholesterol level.

### Heartstart UK

For information about a free, two-hour course in emergency life support, contact Heartstart UK at the British Heart Foundation. The course teaches you to:

- recognise the warning signs of a heart attack
- help someone who is choking or bleeding
- deal with someone who is unconscious
- know what to do if someone collapses, and
- perform cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) if someone has stopped breathing and his or her heart has stopped beating.

## For more information on statistics quoted in this booklet

Statement	Where you can find out more about this
<p><b>Page 6</b> Physical activity halves the risk of developing coronary heart disease.</p>	<p>From: 'Physical activity and the incidence of coronary heart disease in middle aged women and men', by AR Folsom, DK Arnett, RG Hutchinson et al. Published in 1997 in <i>Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise</i>, volume 29, pages 901-09.</p>
<p>Among people who have heart attacks, those who have been physically active are more likely to survive the heart attack compared with people who have not been active.</p>	<p>From: 'Factors determining case fatality in myocardial infarction. "Who dies in a heart attack?"', by G Wannamethee, P Whincup, A Shaper et al. Published in 1995 in the <i>British Heart Journal</i>, volume 74 (3), pages 324-31.</p>
<p>Physical activity as part of a rehabilitation programme reduces the risk of dying after a heart attack.</p>	<p>From: 'An overview of randomized trials of rehabilitation with exercise after myocardial infarction', by G O'Connor, JE Baring, S Yusef et al. Published in 1989 in <i>Circulation</i>, volume 80, pages 234-44.</p>

<p>Physical activity reduces the risk of having a stroke.</p>	<p>From: 'Physical activity and stroke incidence in women and men – the NHANES I epidemiological follow-up study', by RF Gillum, ME Mussolino and DD Ingram. Published in 1996 in the <i>American Journal of Epidemiology</i>, volume 143, pages 860-09.</p>
<p>[Physical activity] helps lower blood pressure.</p>	<p>From: 'The effectiveness of exercise training in lowering blood pressure: a meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials of 4 weeks or longer', by JA Halbert, CA Silagy, P Finuacine et al. Published in 1997 in the <i>Journal of Human Hypertension</i>, volume 11, pages 641-49.</p>
<p>[Physical activity] reduces the chance of developing diabetes.</p>	<p>From: 'Physical activity and reduced occurrence of non-insulin dependent diabetes mellitus', by S Helmrigh, D Ragland, R Leung et al. Published in 1991 in the <i>New England Journal of Medicine</i>, volume 325, pages 147-52.</p>
<p>If you already have diabetes, physical activity can help you to control it.</p>	<p>From: 'Exercise and type 2 diabetes: position stand', by the American College of</p>

	<p>Sports Medicine. Published in 2000 in <i>Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise</i>, volume 32, pages 1345-60.</p>
<p>[Physical activity] helps you to lose weight if you are overweight.</p>	<p>From: 'The treatment and prevention of obesity – systematic review', by AM Glenny, S O'Meara, A Melville et al. Published in 1997 in the <i>International Journal of Obesity</i>, volume 1887, pages 715-37.</p>
<p><b>Pages 6 and 7</b> Physical activity ... can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● make you feel more energetic</li> </ul>	<p>From: 'Exercise and physical health: Musculo-skeletal health and functional capabilities' by I Vuori. Conference notes from an International Scientific Consensus Conference, Quebec City, May 1995.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● relieve stress</li> <li>● help you to relax</li> </ul>	<p>From: <i>Physical Activity and Psychological Well Being</i>, by S Biddle, K Fox and S Boutcher. Published in 2001 by Routledge, London.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● lower the risk of osteoporosis (thinning of the bones)</li> </ul>	<p>From: 'Dose-response of physical activity and low back pain, osteoarthritis and osteoporosis', by I Vuori. Published in 2001 in <i>Medicine</i></p>

	<p><i>and Science in Sports and Exercise</i>, supplement: <i>Dose response issues concerning physical activity and health: An evidence based symposium</i>, volume 33 (6), pages S551-86.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● help older people to stay independent, or become more independent.</li> </ul>	<p>From: 'Exercise dose-response effects on quality of life and independent living in older adults', by W Spirduso and D Cronin. Published in 2001 in <i>Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise</i>, supplement: <i>Dose response issues concerning physical activity and health: An evidence based symposium</i>, volume 33 (6), pages S530-50.</p>
<p><b>Page 7</b> The people who benefit the most [from physical activity] are inactive people who start to take regular moderate exercise.</p>	<p>From: 'Exercise rehabilitation for cardiac patients', by P Thompson. Published in 2001 in <i>The Physician and Sports Medicine</i>, volume 29 (1).</p>
<p>... there is no particular level of activity that you have to reach before you can benefit – a little activity is better than none! And the benefits will start to come as soon as you start being more active.</p>	<p>From: 'Health consequences of physical activity: understanding and challenges regarding dose-response', by WL Haskell. Published in 1994 in <i>Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise</i>, volume 26, pages 649-60.</p>

<p><b>Page 9</b> Surveys have shown that only 3 or 4 in every 10 men, and 2 or 3 in every 10 women in the UK are active enough to give themselves some protection against coronary heart disease.</p>	<p>From: <i>Health Survey for England 1998</i>, by the Joint Health Surveys Unit. Published in 1999 by The Stationery Office, London.</p>
<p><b>Page 11</b> In 9 out of 10 people with high blood pressure there is no single cause of the high blood pressure.</p>	<p>From: <i>Clinical Hypertension</i> (seventh edition), by NM Kaplan. Published in 1998 by Lippincott Williams and Wilkins, Cloth, US. Chapter 1.</p>
<p><b>Page 12</b> ... men who have diabetes are about three times more likely to get coronary heart disease than those without diabetes, and women with diabetes are about four times more likely to get it.</p>	<p>From: <i>Coronary Heart Disease Statistics Database Supplement</i>. Published in 2001 by the British Heart Foundation, London.</p>
<p><b>Page 13</b> In people who have had a heart attack, regular physical activity can result in less angina, and an earlier return to work.</p> <p><b>Page 13</b> There is some evidence that physical activity may help to improve wellbeing, and so speed up recovery.</p>	<p>From: 'Exercise following myocardial infarction: current recommendations', by A Leon. Published in 2000 in <i>Sports Medicine</i>, volume 29 (5), pages 301-11.</p>

## *About the British Heart Foundation*

The British Heart Foundation (BHF) is the leading national charity fighting heart and circulatory disease – the UK's biggest killer. The BHF funds research, education and life-saving equipment and helps heart patients return to a full and active way of life.

We rely entirely on donations to continue our vital work. If you would like to make a donation, please ring our **credit card hotline on 0870 606 3399**. Or fill in the form opposite.

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- Buying BHF Christmas cards and gifts**
- Becoming a volunteer in a British Heart Foundation shop**

**Please send your form to the British Heart Foundation. The address is over the page.**

## Technical terms

<b>aerobic exercise</b>	Repetitive, rhythmic exercise involving large muscle groups such as the legs, shoulders and arms.
<b>angina</b>	Heaviness or tightness in the centre of the chest, which may spread to the arms, neck, jaw, back or stomach. Or it may affect just the neck, jaw, arms or stomach. Caused by narrowed coronary arteries.
<b>atheroma</b>	Fatty material that can build up within the walls of the arteries.
<b>atherosclerosis</b>	The build-up of fatty material within the walls of the arteries.
<b>cholesterol</b>	A fatty material mainly made in the body by the liver.
<b>coronary heart disease</b>	When the walls of the arteries become narrowed by a gradual build-up of fatty material called atheroma.
<b>heart failure</b>	A condition where the heart is not pumping as efficiently as it should.
<b>HDL</b>	High density lipoprotein. The 'protective' cholesterol.
<b>LDL</b>	Low density lipoprotein. The more 'harmful' cholesterol.
<b>osteoporosis</b>	Thinning of the bones.
<b>thrombosis</b>	When a blood clot forms in an artery.

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*Regular physical activity can help protect against heart attacks. If you have recently had a heart attack or heart surgery, going on a rehabilitation programme will help you find out how much activity you can safely do. Or you can ask your doctor or consultant. If you have angina, keep your activity regular and frequent, and within rather than beyond your limits. The main aim is to do 30 minutes' moderate activity a day, on at least five days a week.*