Every hour, five Australians die from heart, stroke and blood vessel disease, a group of conditions together known as cardiovascular disease (CVD). People who survive a stroke or heart attack are often left with disabilities and long-term health problems, which can affect their quality of life and their ability to care for themselves.

Preventing heart attack and stroke can be made easier thanks to an approach called ‘absolute risk’.

If you have not had a heart attack or stroke and are over 45 years old, or are over 35 years old and are of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent, you can ask your doctor to calculate your likelihood of experiencing a heart attack or stroke in the next five years. This score will support you and your doctor to make decisions about the best action to take to improve your health.

When you ask your doctor to calculate your absolute risk score, they will consider factors including:

- your blood pressure
- your age
- your cholesterol levels
- your gender
- whether you have diabetes
- whether you smoke.

Your doctor will also consider other important factors that can increase your risk such as:

- kidney function
- an irregular heartbeat (such as atrial fibrillation)
- family history of heart attack or stroke
- if you are of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent or other cultural background, who are at higher risk
- if you are overweight.

After considering all these factors, your doctor will calculate your percentage score – your absolute risk of experiencing a heart attack or stroke in the next five years. Your doctor will then use treatment guidelines to recommend the appropriate action for your absolute risk level.

Some people who have particular medical conditions do not need a risk score, because they are already at high risk. Your doctor will tell you if you are in this group and advise you about what to do to reduce your risk.

**Your absolute risk score for heart disease and stroke**

Your doctor will calculate a percentage score, or absolute risk, which puts you into one of three categories of risk, being:

- **high risk** – a score over 15 per cent means you are at high risk. If you have a score over 15 per cent, you have at least a one in seven chance of having a heart attack or stroke in the next five years, if nothing is
changed

- **moderate risk** – if you have a score of between 10 and 15 per cent, you have, as a minimum, a one in 10 chance of having a heart attack or stroke in the next five years, if nothing is changed
- **low risk** – if you have a score under 10 per cent, you have a less than 1 in 10 chance of having a heart attack or stroke in the next five years, if nothing is changed.

**Once you know your absolute risk score**

Your doctor will recommend taking action based on the absolute risk score you receive. In some cases, you may need to take medication, while in others, you may be asked to make changes to your health or lifestyle habits.

No matter what your risk score, there are changes that you can make to improve your cardiovascular health. These changes include:

- eating a variety of foods from the five food groups, and limiting sugary, fatty and salty take-away meals and snacks
- including vegetables, wholegrains, fruit, nuts and seeds every day
- choosing healthier fats and oils such as olive or canola oil, nuts, seeds, fish and avocado
- using herbs and spices for flavour instead of salt
- drinking mainly water
- avoiding adding salt to food. Choose ‘no added salt’, ‘low-salt’ or ‘salt-reduced’ foods where possible
- drinking water
- stopping smoking
- being physically active most days of the week
- maintaining a healthy weight
- limiting your alcohol consumption.

You may wish to participate in a formal health and exercise program. Ask your doctor about a suitable program or contact your local community health centre or council for more information.

**Heart Foundation Walking** is Australia’s largest free walking network. It is a social, fun and easy way for people to walk and be active.

**Where to get help**

- Your **GP (doctor)** or other health professional
- **Heart Foundation** Helpline Tel. **13 11 12**
- Community health centre
- **Diabetes Victoria** Tel. **1300 437 386**

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