

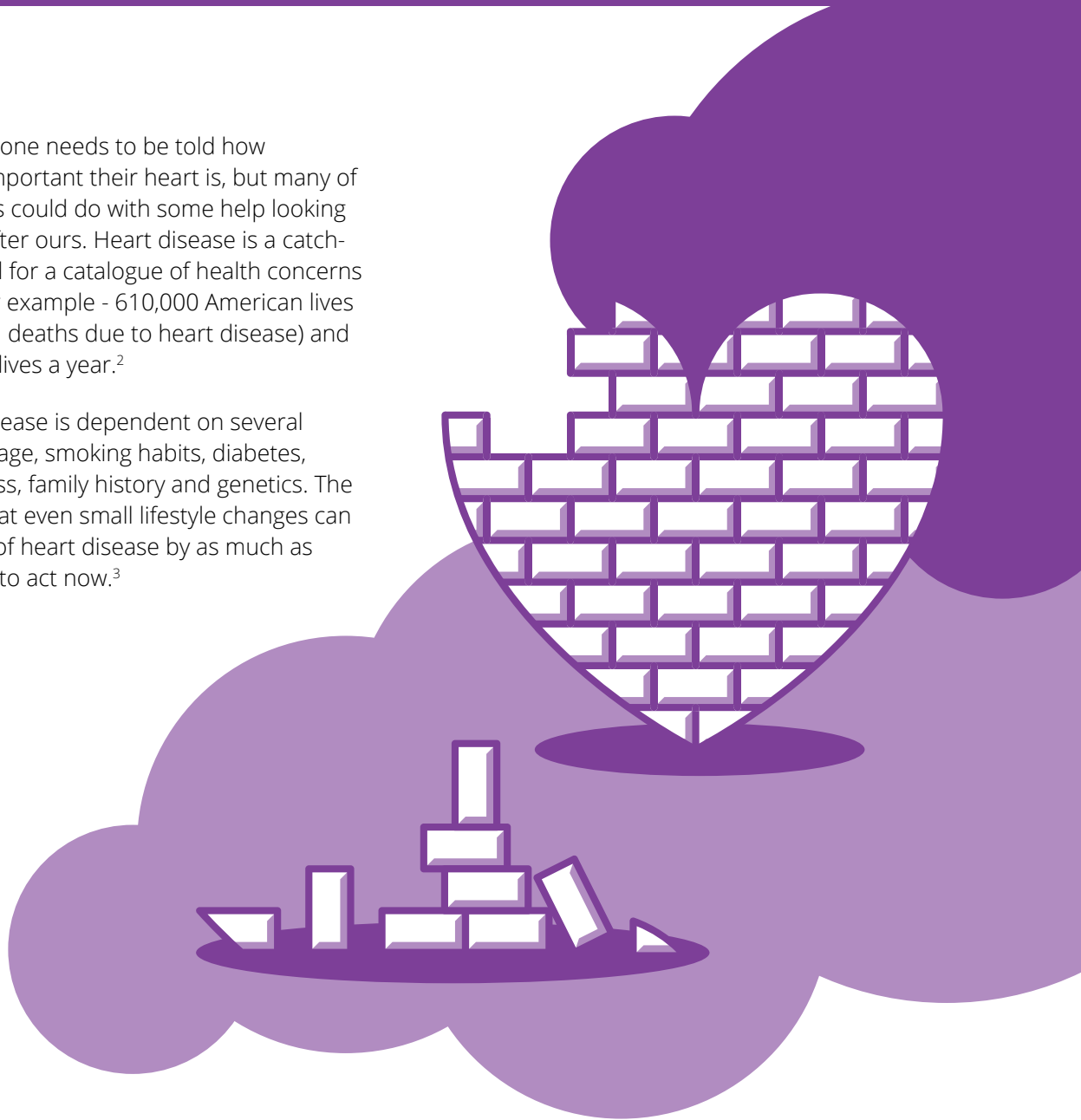
# 6 ways to improve heart health

Follow our expat guide to building good heart health with advice on check-ups, getting active, lowering stress and creating a support network



**N**o one needs to be told how important their heart is, but many of us could do with some help looking after ours. Heart disease is a catch-all for a catalogue of health concerns that claims – for example - 610,000 American lives (one in four U.S. deaths due to heart disease) and 160,000 British lives a year.<sup>2</sup>

Risk of heart disease is dependent on several factors such as age, smoking habits, diabetes, weight and stress, family history and genetics. The good news is that even small lifestyle changes can lower your risk of heart disease by as much as 83%. The key is to act now.<sup>3</sup>



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## So, what can you do to build a healthy heart and avoid heart disease?

Follow our 6 simple steps to improve cardiovascular health, and don't forget, if you're an Aetna International member with any questions, queries or concerns, you can get in touch with our Care and Response Excellence (CARE) team for help anytime, anywhere. [Login or register for Health Hub](#) to get in touch with the CARE team.

1,2,3: DNA & You. 2018 by Hearst Magazine, Inc, Men's Health & Women's Health publication.



## 1. Don't stress it

Stress itself is a risk factor in cardiovascular disease and its one that disproportionately affects expatriate employees. We understand the pressures of living and working abroad, often in demanding roles, with the added challenges of settling families in a new culture and without the support of their domestic support network – friends and extended family.

Many expats find it hard to talk to friends and family about anxiety, depression, stress and mental health, or simply don't have anyone to support them.

Aetna International's Employee Assistance Program (EAP) provides a confidential counselling service from behavioural health experts around the world to help keep you healthy and happy while you're living abroad. Find out if you have access to our EAP through your plan and get the support you need today.

[Stress and your health](#)

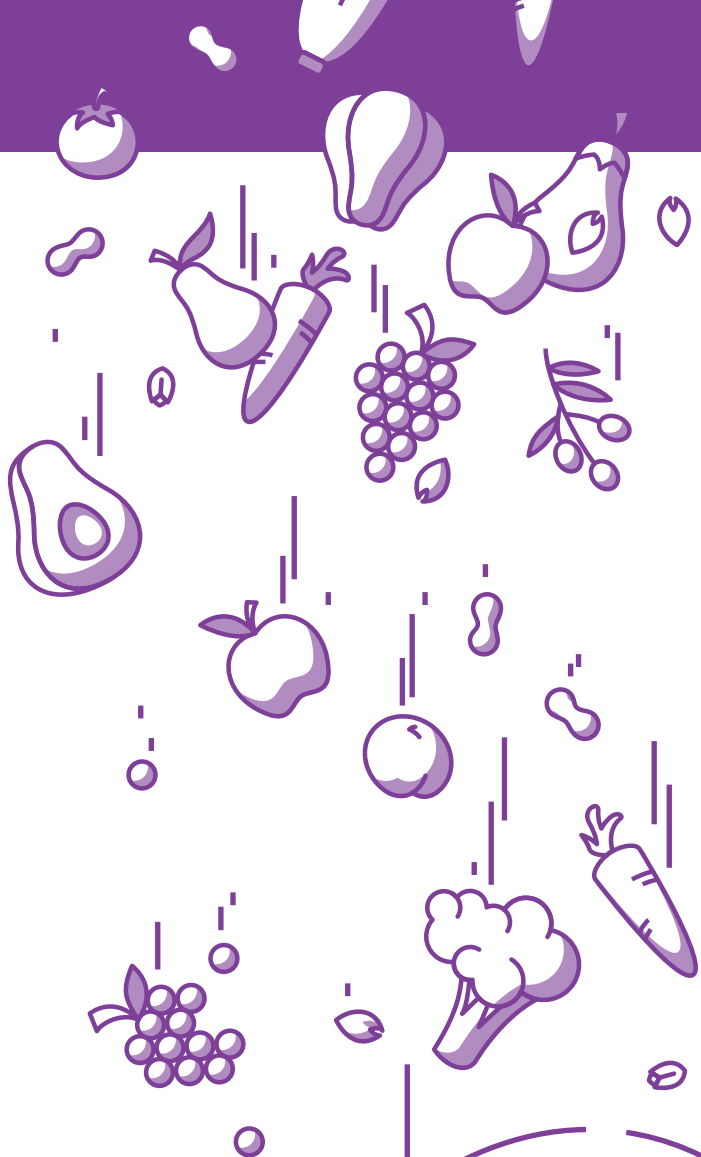
## 2. Know your numbers

There are ways to calculate and monitor your risk of heart disease and it's important to keep up-to-date with your health status.

One method is to use the [American College of Cardiology's ASCVD Risk Estimator Plus](#) tool which gives you a percentage likelihood of developing atherosclerosis (clogged arteries) in the next 10 years. The tool uses your age, sex and ethnicity as well as vital statistics such as your cholesterol level (HDL and LDL) and blood pressure. Most of us won't know these latter statistics so it's important to get a check-up with your primary doctor, who will also recommend you have blood tests at least every four to six years.



1,2,3: DNA & You. 2018 by Hearst Magazine, Inc, Men's Health & Women's Health publication.



### 3. Optimise your intake

Diet is a key factor in maintaining a healthy heart. Studies consistently link high-quality, healthy food to a lower risk of coronary-artery disease.

Ignore the latest diet fad and focus on building a healthy and balanced diet that you will stick to. The key is to gradually remove bad things and replace them with good things to build healthier habits that you can sustain. Inject more vegetables, fruits, whole grains, nuts, legumes and yoghurt into your meals. Remove or cut down food such as red and processed meats, refined grains, sweets and fried food.

Think about this when you make or choose your next meal: what would a healthier option be?

[Tips to improve your diet](#)

### 4. Get moving

Making time to exercise can be hard when you have a job, family and other demands – let alone when you’re trying to do it all in a new country – but increasing your aerobic fitness is an essential part of building a healthy heart.

If you don’t have time to go to the gym or play a sport, try to fit brisk walking or desk exercises into your daily routine. Even these small lifestyle changes can help you to reach the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention-recommended [150 minutes of moderate cardio every week](#).<sup>4</sup>

A balance of strength and cardio work is ideal and many time-poor individuals have found HIIT (High-Intensity Interval Training) a great way to workout. HIIT involves ‘micro workouts’ of as little as 10-minutes, to be done every day. Done over many weeks, the results can [double your stamina](#), increase metabolism and burn fat - and there’s no equipment necessary!



4: [https://www.cdc.gov/physicalactivity/basics/index.htm?CDC\\_AA\\_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fphysicalactivity%2Fbasics%2Fadults%2Findex.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/physicalactivity/basics/index.htm?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fphysicalactivity%2Fbasics%2Fadults%2Findex.htm)

## 5. Tackle cholesterol

The body makes its own cholesterol, but certain foods – those high in saturated or trans fats such as fatty cuts of meat and dairy products – allow cholesterol to build up in your arteries. This build up prevents blood flow around the body and, if it isn't addressed, can result in heart attack.

Without having their blood tested, many people are unaware that their cholesterol levels are too high. As such it is important to find out what your cholesterol numbers are by visiting your primary doctor.

If, after assessing you, your doctor discovers that you are at high risk of cardiovascular disease or have high cholesterol, they may prescribe you statin - a drug that helps to lower cholesterol in the blood.

[How can I lower my cholesterol?](#)

## 6. Build your support network

Mental health is an often-overlooked factor in heart health and can impact the body directly – blood pressure, cholesterol – as well as indirectly by driving unhealthy behaviours such as drugs, drink, smoking and other psychological crutches people rely on to get through a difficult or vulnerable time.

It's important to manage your mental health to avoid the impact on the heart, and the support of friends and/or family is essential. This is particularly pertinent for expats, many of whom move for demanding jobs on their own – but even relocating with a family can bring its own set of stresses and pressures.

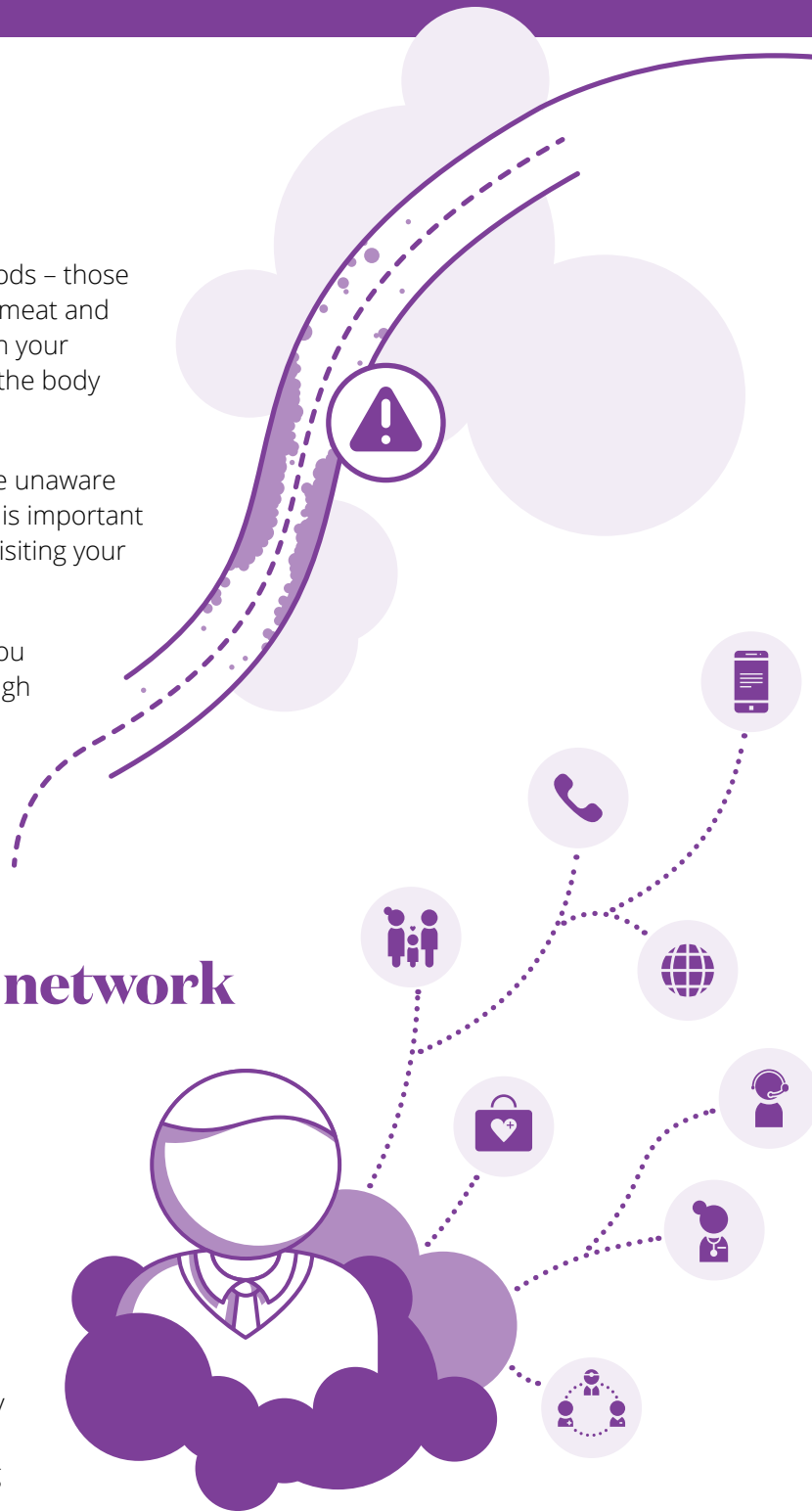
This makes it essential to build and maintain a support network while living away from home and there are many ways to do it. The easiest thing is often staying in touch with family at home by booking in set times and using video call software such as Skype. A good approach is to proactively build relationships with your work colleagues; many international workplaces have a 'buddy'

system to support new arrivals and facilitates work social events. Many of the world's cities have expat communities who can offer support and they're often easy to find and connect with online.

By ensuring you have the support you need when you need it, you'll be able to reduce stress and strengthen your heart and avoid heart disease.

[Read more about expat mental health.](#)

1: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/health/news/3793791/Going-to-the-gym-in-a-lunch-break-makes-you-work-better.html>



## Want to know more?

We know that most of this advice is easier said than done.

You know the right choices, it can just hard to work out how to build them into your routine.

### That's why we're here for you.

As an Aetna International member, you could have access to a range of services that can help and support you while you live abroad.

- **Health coaching:** Our CARE team can provide you with health coaching around nutrition, medication adherence or exercise, for example; behaviours that can help manage lifestyle-related conditions and help people develop healthy habits. To request support through the CARE team, [login to \(or register for\) the Health Hub](#) – your online member portal.
- **Wellness webinars:** You can also access a range of webinars on topics from how to eat well to managing stress. Contact [Aetna's CARE team \(also by logging in to the Health Hub\)](#) to find out more.
- **Corporate well-being programmes:** Aetna International also supports employers and employees with Corporate Well-Being Programs in several regions. For instance, we recently developed a [Mindful Eating Program for a customer in the UAE](#).
- **Employee Assistance Program (EAP):** If your group Aetna plan includes access to EAP, you can get started by:
  - Calling the member services number on the back of your member ID card
  - Logging in to (or register for) the [Health Hub](#) – their online member portal.

Talk to your employer today to find out more about your health and wellness plan benefits or occupational health support.

## Further reading

[Fit for duty: how reducing workplace stress could help prevent heart attacks](#)

[Expatriate stress: Top five pressure points](#)

For those reading a printed version of this PDF, head to [aetnainternational.com/en/about-us/explore/fit-for-duty/corporate-wellness](https://aetnainternational.com/en/about-us/explore/fit-for-duty/corporate-wellness) to access related heart health articles.



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