

# Men's Health



**“The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.”**

**- Henry Thoreau,**

**“There is a time in every man’s education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that ... no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him to till.”**

**- Ralph Waldo Emerson**

By the year 2020, a shocking 80 percent of Britain’s men are predicted to be obese, according to the National Heart Forum. Not only that, but death by obesity-related strokes will rise by 23 percent, and the rate of obesity-related diabetes is going to double.

It’s not just weight issues that are troubling the male population. Prostate cancer is the second biggest cancer killer in men, and according to Cancer Research, more than 10,000 men a year die from the disease. With such a grim outlook on the horizon, the necessity for men to live a healthy and balanced lifestyle has never been so important.

The United Nations states that the average life expectancy of a man is approximately 77, and whilst this may seem high, it is four years less than that of the average woman. Men are facing greater pressures in life than ever before, and are three times more likely to commit suicide than women.

Men are falling behind in the health stakes. Alcoholism, depression and eating disorders are all taking their toll. The need for them to find lifestyles that bolster both their physical wellbeing and their mental health has never been greater. If you’d like to discuss any of the issues raised in this Helpsheet, the CiC 24-hour Confidential Care Adviceline is available for practical and emotional support.

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## Getting active

The best way to increase your mental and physical wellbeing is exercise. Men's Health Week in June this year was all about getting up and getting active. Men's Health Forum, the online community responsible for creating this annual event, believe that too many men are missing out on regular exercise. With a society driven by desk jobs, games consoles and television, it is no wonder that men are perceived to be increasingly inactive.

Not only does exercise help to maintain a healthy weight, it also has numerous other benefits. Physical activities are known to relieve stress and anxiety, improve sexual performance and reduce the risk of cancer and heart disease. What better reason to get off the sofa?

Regular exercise doesn't have to mean gruelling military-style training. Walking or cycling to work, getting off the bus

a stop early and taking the lift instead of the stairs all contribute towards a more active lifestyle. The average adult should aim for between 20-30 minutes of exercise a day to maintain a healthy weight.

One of the aims of Men's Health Week is to encourage men to join football teams to boost their wellbeing. Premier League Health and Primary Care Trusts will be working together to encourage men to tackle issues such as depression, alcohol abuse and poor physical health, and make new friends in the process.

Even casual exercise such as walking is known to reduce blood pressure and aid weight loss. The average adult should be walking 10,000 steps a day to lose weight according to the NHS. Investing in a pedometer will keep track of the amount of steps taken in a day, and walking with friends or a partner can make help maintain motivation.

## Eating well

When you feel ready, shift your energies from the problem to potential. A healthy, balanced diet is the most important factor in maintaining a healthy weight and lifestyle, and to reduce risks such as cancer and high blood pressure.

According to a consumer survey carried out by the Food Standards Agency, Britain's knowledge of what constitutes a healthy diet is relatively high. Most adults are aware of the different types of food

they should be eating and how much of each food group they should be consuming.

However, contrasting data from the National Diet and Nutrition Survey shows that UK adults are not eating healthily, with most consuming too much sugar, saturated fat and salt. Fruit and vegetable portions were also revealed as being fewer than three portions a day. With obesity levels rising constantly, this is an issue that must be tackled.

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## Mental wellbeing

Being fit and healthy isn't just about exercising regularly and eating properly. Mental health is just as important as physical health, and in many cases is far more complex. According to an investigation by the Men's Health Forum, men are half as likely to be diagnosed with depression than women are. Although there is no separate form of depression purely experienced by men, the symptoms can be portrayed differently between the sexes.

Depression in men can stem from many sources. Research indicates that relationship troubles are the biggest cause of depression in men. Arguments and avoiding discussions can cause damage to relationships and men's mental wellbeing. Making sure communication is always accessible in a relationship is vital to avoid feeling low.

Depression can also lead to men feeling less confident about their bodies, and less satisfied about their sex life. Unemployment and being made redundant also contribute towards a low mood, as can retirement. Men are also more likely to commit suicide between the ages of 16-24 and 30-59, according to recent statistics.

According to the Royal College of Psychiatrists (RCP) men are less likely to admit that they need help, or confide in someone about their problems. Men may experience different symptoms of depression to females.

These, according to the RCP, include:

- ▶ Sudden anger
- ▶ Irritability
- ▶ Lashing out
- ▶ Loss of control
- ▶ Greater risk taking
- ▶ Aggression

If you are experiencing any of the above symptoms, it is important to talk to your GP. Exercise, a balanced diet and avoiding alcohol and drugs can all help to relieve the symptoms of depression.

Worryingly, men are more likely to turn to "self medication" such as drugs and alcohol, than see a medical specialist. Men are twice as likely to be dependent on alcohol as women, and three times more likely to be in the most hazardous state of dependence. Alcohol can make the symptoms of depression worse, rather than cure it. Exercise, a balanced diet and getting eight hours of sleep a night can all help relieve depression.



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## Keep in check 'down there'

Most men are embarrassed to talk about their personal issues and problems, especially when they involve certain "taboo" areas. Prostate cancer is the second biggest cause of cancer deaths in men, coming second to lung cancer. Although awareness is slowly spreading, most men aren't even sure what the prostate is, or what it does.

The prostate is a gland found only in men, situated underneath the bladder. The prostate is part of the reproductive system, and secretes a liquid that forms around 25% of semen. According to Cancer Research, over the last thirty years, detection of prostate cancer has more than tripled. This is in correlation with improving detection rates and methods, but it is still a positive trend.

Encouragingly, over three quarters of men diagnosed with prostate cancer survive the disease for more than five years. If the symptoms are diagnosed early enough they can be treated successfully. 85% of cases are most commonly diagnosed in men over sixty. According to the Prostate Cancer Foundation, symptoms can be caused by other prostate problems, so it is important that if you experience any of the following, you should visit your GP:

- ▶ A need to urinate frequently, especially during the night
- ▶ Weak or interrupted flow of urine
- ▶ Painful or burning urination
- ▶ Difficulty starting urination or holding back urine
- ▶ Painful ejaculation

- ▶ Difficulty in having an erection
- ▶ Blood in urine or semen
- ▶ Frequent pain or stiffness in the lower back, upper thighs and hips.

Men can find these symptoms embarrassing and difficult to talk about, but it is important to get them checked out. Although testicular cancer is a rare cancer in the UK, men should also regularly check themselves. Statistics show that testicular cancer only caused 58 deaths in 2007, but if you spot any unusual lumps or bumps, it's important to see your GP.



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## Practical guidelines

- ▶ Don't isolate. There is a huge difference between productive solitude and isolation. Men need time alone away from the pressures of everyday life (meditation can be a useful tool here). But as soon as that solitude becomes an escape or an evasion from the challenges and pleasures of living, it becomes loneliness.
- ▶ Connect with other men. While female friends are essential to maintaining a healthy and balanced social life, there is no substitute for regular contact and honest conversation with other males. Men and women face different emotional challenges, life is difficult, and you need to be listened to by peers who know what you are going through. If you feel you cannot talk openly to male friends, consider joining a men's group.
- ▶ Get outdoors. According to the Men's Health Forum, research suggests that only a third of adult men are moderately active on a regular basis and just one in ten do regular vigorous exercise. In a working world that is increasingly confined to the office cubicle, the laptop and the airline seat, men can easily lose touch with their wild streak, which leaves them feeling debilitated and weakened. So get walking, cycling, or even gardening.
- ▶ Watch the booze. Alcohol can be a wonderful social lubricant, in moderation. But getting drunk takes you away from other people, not towards them. The same goes for drugs and excessive eating. If you want to cut down on any of these things and find that you cannot, then you should think about some kind of treatment.
- ▶ Rescue your sexuality. If you're in a relationship, spend time with your partner exploring both your similarities and your differences. Argument and debate are essential to any

flourishing relationship, criticism and aggression are not. If you're not with someone and you want to be, try going on dates and actually listening to the person as opposed to simply going out "on the pull". If you think you might be gay and are afraid to explore the issue, find a trusted friend or a counselor to discuss your feelings.

- ▶ Believe in your work. A lot of men lose their sense of themselves because they are in jobs that hold no meaning for them. No one is saying you must rush out and resign, but if your work is giving you no joy, it could start affecting your health. There are lots of ways to get creative with your working life, long before you need to change jobs.
- ▶ Take a break. Overwork is one of the fastest routes there is to ill-health and burnout. Whether you learn to take a ten-minute breather with your shoes off in a local park, or start using your whole holiday allowance to go somewhere new and exciting, the world will not implode if you turn your Blackberry off from time to time.
- ▶ Retrieve your hobbies. Men are often reluctant to admit that the one thing they wish they could get back is the thing they loved to do as a little boy. Whether it's stamp collecting, building model planes, playing the piano or just messing around in boats, reviving your boyhood hobby is a great way of putting some spark back in your life. If you loved it then, you'll love it even more now.
- ▶ Get some help. It may be cliché that men are more reluctant to talk about their problems than women, but it is often true. A good place to start is the CiC 24-hour Confidential Care Adviceline (see below), but your GP is another possibility, especially if you have medical worries.