

## Men's Health Forum in Ireland

The Men's Health Forum in Ireland (MHFI) is a network of individuals and organisations, men and women, from both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The Forum was established in 1999, and operates on an all-island basis.

MHFI seeks to promote all aspects of the health and well being of men and boys on the island of Ireland through research, training, networking, health initiatives and advocacy. One of the Forum's core areas of work is the coordination of Men's Health Week activity on the island of Ireland each year.

**For more details visit: [www.mhfi.org](http://www.mhfi.org)**

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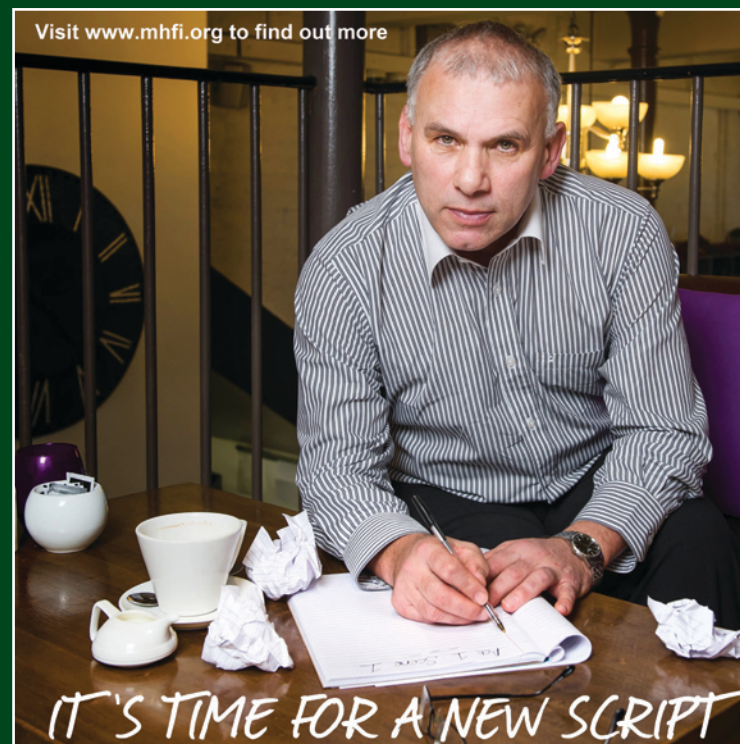


# MAN MANUAL

For Men on the Island of Ireland



## Challenges and Choices





Project supported by the PHA



Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte  
Health Service Executive

Men, on the island of Ireland, suffer from poor health and die too young ...

- Local men die, on average, about four and a half years younger than women do.
- Males have higher death rates than females for virtually all of the leading causes of death.
- Poor lifestyles are responsible for many chronic diseases.
- Late presentation to the doctor leads to a large number of problems becoming untreatable ...

Indeed, while many of these conditions are preventable, the number of men suffering from them may, in fact, rise in the future.

This booklet contains a wide range of information relating to men's health on the island of Ireland. It seeks to let you know what the main challenges are and, more importantly, what you can choose to do about them.

The publication of this booklet has only been possible because of the generous support given by the Public Health Agency in Northern Ireland, the Health Service Executive in the Republic of Ireland, and the author – Dr Ian Banks.



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- Additional content and web links (Northern Ireland) - Colin Fowler, Director of Operations, Men's Health Forum in Ireland

# Men's health challenges

1. Order a soft drink the next time you're in the pub.
2. Try some fruit or vegetables you've never tasted before or think you don't like.
3. Make at least one journey by foot or bicycle instead of going by car.
4. If you're under 25 and sexually active, get yourself checked for chlamydia.
5. Stressed out? Walk away from tense situations before you blow up.
6. Find out about the opening hours at your local GP's surgery.
7. Get your blood pressure checked within the next two weeks.
8. Get a mate to quit smoking with you – and get advice about how to stop.
9. Show a doctor that lump, strange-shaped mole, or rash that's bothering you.
10. If you get backache, don't let it become a pain in the ass. Get it sorted.

### And here's why

1. We're challenging you to think about alcohol because some men drink in ways that could damage their health in the future. Alcohol-related illness is responsible for the death of too many men in Ireland.
2. We're encouraging you to eat more fruit and vegetables because most men don't get enough of them. Taking your '5-a-day' will reduce your risk of heart disease and cancer - and will keep you regular.
3. Walking, instead of using the car, is an obvious challenge – it helps your health, your bank balance and the environment.
4. Chlamydia isn't a Greek island – it's Ireland's most common sexually transmitted infection. There are often no symptoms in men, so you may not know you've got it (until you want to have a baby and you or your partner aren't able to). That's why we're challenging you to a check-up.
5. Stress is another obvious one. We've all done things we regret when stressed or angry. You won't regret walking away.
6. We're suggesting finding out about your doctor's opening hours because many surgeries now allow you to go there before and after work or at weekends.
7. Getting your blood pressure checked is easy, quick and painless. Many pharmacies will do it, or ask the nurse at your GP surgery. High blood pressure can cause heart disease and strokes – but there are usually no obvious symptoms before this happens.
8. If you smoke, you probably figure that you know the risks already. But did you realise that many men under 50 can't get an erection because of smoking?
9. Do you have a lump, strange-shaped mole, rash or other unusual thing that you've been ignoring? We're challenging you to act now, and get it checked out by a doctor. It might be a false alarm, but it could be something more serious.
10. Whatever your work, make sure that you take care of your back. Always keep it straight when lifting heavy objects. Adjust your chair so that your eyes are level with the top of your computer screen. If required, a pharmacist can advise you about the best type of pain relief.

Yes, improving your health is that easy.

Are you up for it?

For more information visit:

[www.hscni.net](http://www.hscni.net)

[www.hse.ie](http://www.hse.ie)

[www.mhfi.org](http://www.mhfi.org)

[www.nhs.uk/SymptomCheckers](http://www.nhs.uk/SymptomCheckers)



# Man Manual

## Challenges & Choices

### Contents

Challenges & Choices . . . . .	3
Alcohol . . . . .	5
Food . . . . .	8
Physical activity . . . . .	13
Sexually-transmitted infections . . . . .	15
Local health services . . . . .	17
Blood pressure . . . . .	18
Stress . . . . .	21
Smoking . . . . .	24
Skin . . . . .	27
Back . . . . .	29

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**The Author and the Publisher have taken care to ensure that the advice given in this edition is current at the time of publication. The Reader is advised to read and understand the instructions and information material included with all medicines recommended, and to consider carefully the appropriateness of any treatments. The Author and the Publisher will have no liability for adverse results, inappropriate or excessive use of the remedies offered in this book or their level of effectiveness in individual cases. The Author and the Publisher do not intend that this book be used as a substitute for medical advice. Advice from a medical practitioner should always be sought for any symptom or illness.**

**WARNING ...****READING THIS MANUAL CAN SERIOUSLY  
IMPROVE YOUR HEALTH**

Welcome to 'Challenges and Choices'.

Thank you for taking the time to read this manual. We hope that you will find something in it which is useful to you.

There's no denying that the state of men's health on the island of Ireland is often poor. However, there are things which can be done to change this situation. Men, themselves, can play a key role in doing this. But their efforts need to be supported by both government policies and service provision which offers men the right things in the right ways.

This manual contains a range of information which can help to improve your health. It tries to let you know what the main challenges are and, more importantly, what you can do about them - if you choose to. We promise that it won't preach at you or nag you. It'll just tell it as it is.

You don't have to read the whole manual in one sitting. Dip in and out of it whenever you have time. Each section is only a couple of pages long.

As it says at the top of this page: *'Reading this manual can seriously improve your health!'*

**Challenges & Choices****Here is your first challenge:  
Read this manual**

Don't worry, it won't ask you to do the impossible. There is no shortage of people queuing up to tell you just exactly what you must do to improve your health. Unfortunately most of these people don't ask what you *want to do*.

So, just for a change, to meet every challenge we give you three choices. The first choice is to do nothing (just like when the oil warning light on the dashboard of your car comes on and you choose to keep driving until you need a new engine). The second choice is DIY (so when the warning light comes on, you stop and check the oil level). The third choice is to find an expert.



Check out  
**[www.mhfi.org](http://www.mhfi.org)**

[for information on men's health in Ireland]

*It's up to you, but are you up for it?*



## Alcohol

### The Challenge

Order a soft drink the next time you're in the pub.

### The Reason

A 'round' or two (or three or four if it's Friday) with your workmates may seem like a good way of finishing off the working day. Wine with a meal also probably improves digestion, not to mention conversation!

The problems start if you drink too much and too often. For example, it is estimated that the current intake of pure alcohol per person in the Republic of Ireland is 11.7 litres per annum. This is high in relation to other countries. However, since a large number of people in Ireland are teetotal, this implies that those who do drink are exceeding even this figure.

In 2012, the National Advisory Committee on Drugs in the Republic of Ireland published a report on alcohol consumption and alcohol-related harm among adults. This drew upon findings from the 2010/11 general population drug prevalence survey. The report showed that, among current drinkers aged 18-24 years, 82% of males scored positive for harmful drinking. It also highlighted that one in five drinkers reported that they had experienced harm (such as harm to health, work,

friendships, or being involved in a fight or an accident) in the previous 12 months as a result of their drinking. Men were almost twice as likely as women to report such harm.

However, these problems don't only affect individuals. There is an economic cost to alcohol use as well ...

- A 2010 report for the Department of Health Social Services and Public Safety estimated that the social cost of alcohol-related harm in Northern Ireland could be as much as £900 million each year.
- In 2007, the overall cost of problem alcohol use to the Republic of Ireland was estimated as €3.7 billion.

These figures reflect the cost of medical treatment, crime, lost working hours, judicial proceedings, road traffic accidents, assaults, public order offences, debt problems ... that are associated with excessive alcohol use.

### The Choices

#### *Do nothing*

OK, but in the Republic of Ireland, there are 88 deaths every month which are directly attributable to alcohol. In Northern Ireland, it is estimated that 178 men died during 2012 from alcohol-related conditions. Be careful, it might be your round next.

**DIY**

Some simple steps you can take to continue enjoying your evenings at the pub whilst avoiding the harmful effects are ...

- Walk to the pub and burn off some of the extra calories on the way.
- Drink plenty of water before, during and after the pub. If you're thirsty, you'll tend to drink more alcohol.
- Drink after a meal rather than before – you won't feel so hungry and, so, won't feel like drinking so much.

- Cut down the strength of your drinks. If you normally drink strong lager (5% ABV or higher), try switching to a lower strength lager (e.g. 3.5% ABV).
- Start by trying to have one alcohol-free day each week – and if you can manage that, then go for two or three.

Avoid mixing alcohol and work. Drinking while on the job impairs work performance and increases your chances of an accident in the workplace. It also uses up some of your precious 'maximum units'.

There is a difference between how the recommended maximum amounts of alcohol are calculated in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. However, the most important message is 'less is more' ...

**NORTHERN IRELAND**

It is, currently, recommended that men should: drink no more than 21 units of alcohol per week; take no more than four units in any one day; and have at least two alcohol-free days each week.

The number of units of alcohol in a drink depends on the amount (volume) and strength (ABV). One unit of alcohol is equivalent to 10ml of pure alcohol.

As a rough guide:

- A pint of ordinary beer (3.5% ABV) = 2 units
- A pint of strong beer (5% ABV) = 3 units
- A medium glass (175ml) of wine (12% ABV) = 2 units
- A 275ml bottle of alcopop = 1.5 units
- A measure of spirits (35ml) = 1.4 units

The definition of binge drinking for men is consuming 8 or more units in one session.

**REPUBLIC OF IRELAND**



...and some drinks are more than one standard drink



**ARE YOU AT RISK FROM DRINKING ALCOHOL?**

Risk	Men	Women	Common effects
Low risk	17 standard drinks or fewer per week with two alcohol-free days	11 standard drinks or fewer per week with two alcohol-free days	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased relaxation</li> <li>• Sociability</li> </ul>
Increased risk	18 to 40 standard drinks per week	12 to 28 standard drinks per week	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Less energy</li> <li>• Depression/stress</li> <li>• Insomnia</li> <li>• Impotence</li> <li>• Risk of injury</li> <li>• High blood pressure</li> </ul>
High risk	41 or more standard drinks per week	29 or more standard drinks per week	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All of the above and...</li> <li>• Memory loss</li> <li>• Risk of liver disease</li> <li>• Risk of cancer</li> <li>• Risk of alcohol dependence</li> </ul>

Source: www.healthpromotion.ie/hp-files/docs/HPM00646.pdf

**AT HOME**

If you do most of your drinking at home rather than in the pub, the same general advice applies, but there are some particular points to think about:

- If you drink spirits, watch your measures. Pouring freehand generally results in a larger measure than you get in the pub.
- When buying beer or wine to take home, choose those with the lower alcohol content. A bottle of wine between two with a meal may not seem like much but, if it's 12% ABV, that's around 4.3 units of alcohol (NI) / 4 standard drinks (RoI) each.

**Find an expert**

If you are worried about your drinking, the best place to start is to visit your GP. They will be able to advise you further, can check out your physical health, and will be able to put you in touch with local sources of help.

Other useful sources of advice and information include:

**Addiction NI**

Tel: 02890 664434 (NI)  
www.addictionni.com

**Al-Anon and Al-Ateen**

www.al-anonuk.org.uk

**Alcohol Action Ireland**

www.alcoholireland.ie

**Alcohol and You**

Tel: 02892 604422 (NI)  
www.alcoholandyouni.com

**Alcoholics Anonymous**

www.alcoholicsanonymous.ie

**Drink Help**

www.drinkhelp.ie

**HSE Drugs and Alcohol Helpline**

Tel: 1800 459 459 (RoI)  
www.drugs.ie/alcohol\_info

**Know Your Limits**

www.knowyourlimits.info

**NI Direct**

www.nidirect.gov.uk/index/information-and-services/health-and-well-being/healthy-living/sensible-drinking.htm

**Your Drinking**

www.yourdrinking.ie

## Food

### The Challenge

Try some fruit or vegetables you've never tasted before or think you don't like.

### The Reason

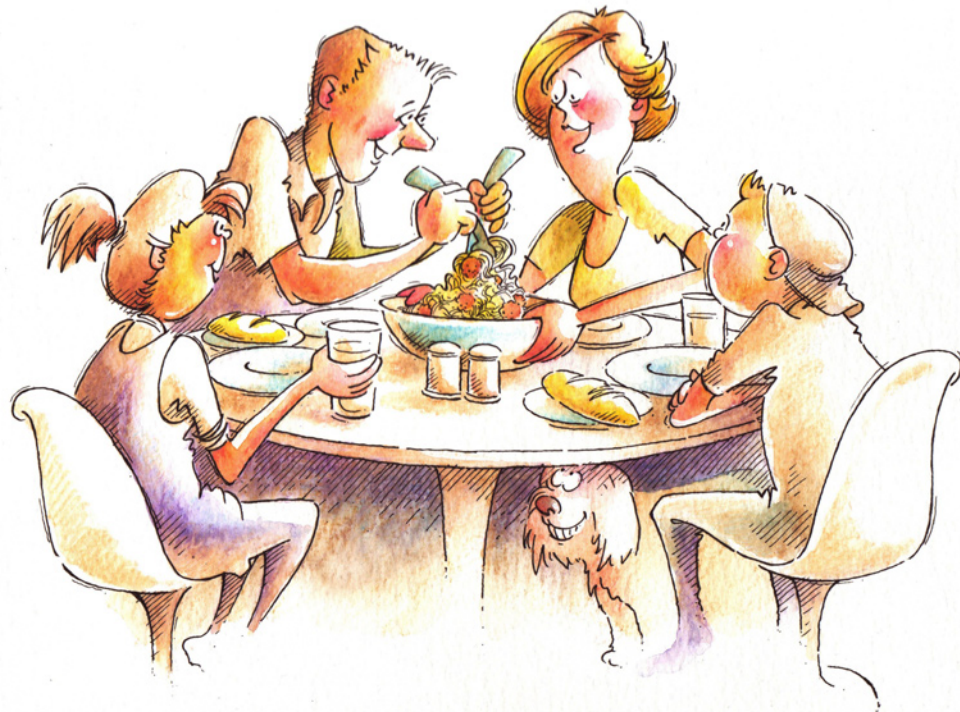
A well-balanced diet not only improves your general health and well-being and helps maintain a healthy weight, but can also lower your cholesterol, keep your blood pressure down, and reduce your risk of developing heart disease, diabetes and some cancers.

### The Choices

#### Do nothing

It is estimated that about 8 out of 10 men in Ireland don't eat enough fruit and vegetables. This is a pity, because (a) heart disease is the single biggest killer of men and (b) in Ireland, bowel cancer is the second most common cancer. It is also the second most common cause of cancer deaths in Ireland.

The good news? ... Both of these conditions can be prevented.



Men's Health Forum in Ireland: [www.mhfi.org](http://www.mhfi.org)

### DIY

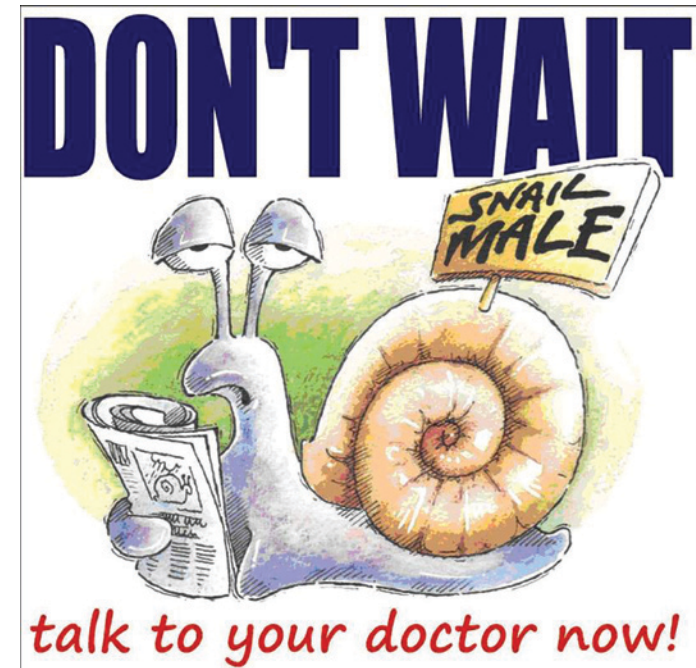
First of all, do actually have breakfast. You wouldn't expect your car to work without fuel, and your body is no different. Equally, you wouldn't put crude oil into your car, so take care over what you eat. That traditional fried breakfast may be tempting - and once in a while won't harm you - but did you know that a typical fry-up with bacon, sausages, fried egg, toast and a dollop of sauce is going to take up half of your recommended daily intake of calories, almost all your total saturated fat allowance, just about your entire salt intake, and most of your daily protein as well?

If you like a cooked breakfast, why

not try beans on toast, or scrambled eggs and mushrooms on toast - but make the toast wholemeal and grill rather than fry those mushrooms!

Or maybe try some of the following instead:

- A cereal with no added sugar, preferably wholegrain and low in salt. Perhaps try it with low fat milk.
- Some fruit.
- A couple of slices of wholemeal toast with low fat spread (or at least low-salt butter).
- A medium-sized glass of fruit drink – either fruit juice (not squash – which doesn't count towards the 5-a-day quota) or a fruit smoothie.



Men's Health Forum in Ireland: [www.mhfi.org](http://www.mhfi.org)

It's easy to build at least

5

different fruit and veg into your day.

One portion is:



1 medium glass of orange juice



7 strawberries



A handful of sliced peppers, onions and carrots



1 medium apple



16 okra



1 medium banana



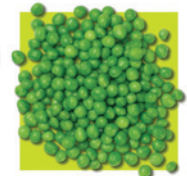
1 small mixed salad



3 heaped tablespoons of cooked kidney beans



3 whole dried apricots



3 heaped tablespoons of peas



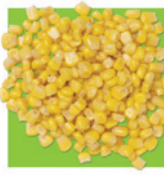
1 handful of grapes



1 tablespoon raisins



7 cherry tomatoes



3 heaped tablespoons of corn



2 spears of broccoli

### Fruit and vegetables

Unless you have been hiding under a rock for the past few years, you will know that eating plenty of fruit and vegetables every day is vital for great health. The current average guide is to eat at least five servings each day (equivalent to 400g). Almost all fruit and vegetables count towards your five servings a day. What's more, there's no limit to how much you can consume – so the more you eat, the better.

It's also good to know that you should eat a variety of fruit and vegetables to get the maximum nutritional benefits. This is because they each contain different combinations of fibre, vitamins, minerals and other nutrients. Besides, eating the same ones every day would be boring.

Reaching 5-a-day doesn't have to be difficult or unpleasant. Consider the following:

- A handful of raisins on your cereal in the morning is not only tasty – but counts as one.
- A glass of orange juice and you're at two already.
- An apple will give you more long-term energy than a cup of coffee.
- Copy your favourite tennis player, and grab a banana for extra energy.
- Chop up lots of vegetables and use them in a stir-fry. Quick, easy and super healthy.
- Add some mushrooms or peas to your curry – and you've hit 6-a-day. Easy Peasy!

### Starchy foods

You also need to make sure you have enough starchy foods in your diet.

Most men should be eating:

- More bread, especially wholemeal or granary breads, but also seedy bread, chapattis, pitta bread, bagels and tortillas.
- More foods such as rice, pasta (wholegrain varieties where possible) and potatoes (but not chips).
- More beans, lentils or peas.

### Fat in your diet

Watch the fat in your diet. You should be cutting down on food that is high in saturated fat or trans fats which can increase the amount of cholesterol in the blood and increase the risk of developing heart disease.

Foods to avoid include:

- Meat products such as meat pies and sausages.
  - Fast food.
  - Hard cheese, butter and lard.
  - Some margarines.
  - Pastry, cakes and biscuits.
  - Cream, coconut oil and palm oil.
- Consider replacing these with foods which are high in unsaturated fat – and which actually reduce cholesterol levels, as well as providing essential fatty acids. Foods high in unsaturated fats are:
- Oily fish (such as sardines or mackerel).
  - Avocados.
  - Nuts and seeds.
  - Sunflower, rapeseed, olive and vegetable oils (and spreads).



**Salt in your diet**

It's also important to cut down the amount of salt in your diet. Although salt is vital for life, too much is harmful – as it can raise your blood pressure. People with high blood pressure are three times more likely to develop heart disease or have a stroke than those with normal blood pressure.

Ways to reduce salt include:

- Eating home-cooked meals wherever possible.
- Using fresh or frozen vegetables rather than canned ones.
- Eating fresh poultry, fish or lean meat, rather than smoked or processed types.
- Cooking rice, pasta and vegetables without salt.
- Cutting back on frozen dinners, pizza, instant rice and pasta, canned soups and salad dressings.
- Avoiding foods preserved in brine (such as pickled vegetables) and condiments (such as mustard, ketchup, and barbecue sauce).

**Find an expert**

You can get good advice and support from:

**British Heart Foundation**  
www.bhf.org.uk

**Choose to Live Better**  
www.choosetolivebetter.com

**Diabetes Ireland**

Tel: 1850 909 909 (Rol)  
www.diabetes.ie

**Diabetes UK**

Tel: 0345 123 2399 (NI)  
www.diabetes.org.uk

**Enjoy Healthy Eating**

www.enjoyhealthyeating.info

**HEART UK –****The Cholesterol Charity**

Tel: 0345 450 5988 (NI)  
www.heartuk.org.uk

**HSE Nutrition Information**

www.hse.ie/nutritioninfo

**Irish Heart Foundation**

Tel: 1890 432 787 - Heart and Stroke  
Helpline (Rol)  
www.irishheart.ie

**Little Steps**

www.littlesteps.eu/healthy-eating/  
importance

**NI Chest, Heart and Stroke**

www.nichs.org.uk

**NHS Choices**

www.nhs.uk/Livewell/healthy-eating/  
Pages/Healthyeating.aspx

**Safefood**

Tel: 0800 085 1683 (NI)  
Tel: 1850 404 567 (Rol)  
www.safefood.eu/Healthy-Eating.aspx

**Weigh2Live**

http://weigh2live.safefood.eu

## Physical activity

**The Challenge**

Make at least one journey by foot or bicycle instead of going by car.

**The Reason**

On average, men in Ireland die almost four and a half years earlier than women. Around 100,000 men die early each and every year in the UK. That's one man every four and a half minutes. Some men can run a mile in under that time.

**The Choices****Do nothing**

Lack of physical activity, together with poor diet, has led to approximately 1 in 4 men in Ireland now being obese. A further 44% are overweight. Diabetes caused by obesity is increasing fast. Diabetes is one of the single most

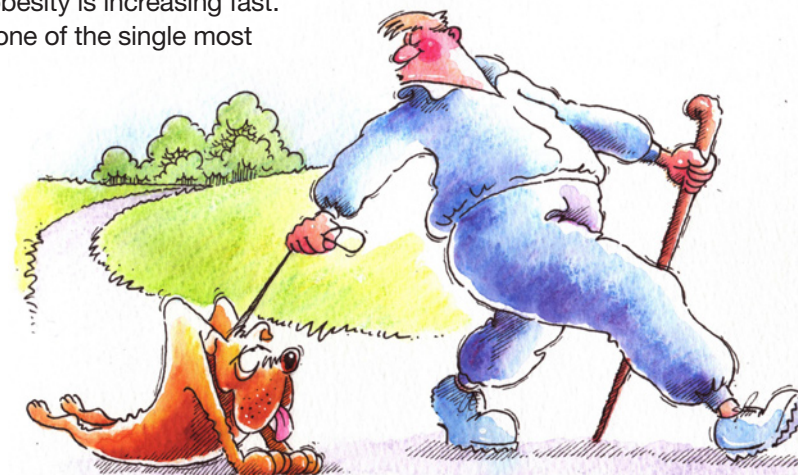
common causes of erectile dysfunction (ED or impotence). Being up for it may be a bigger problem than you think.

**DIY**

Men who increase their activity level over a five year period cut their chances of dying early by almost half. Walking instead of using the car helps your health, your bank balance and the environment.

Exercise will make you feel better, look better and who knows... maybe even make you more attractive (showers permitting of course!).

Of course many jobs require a significant amount of exercise. But if your job doesn't, there are simple things you can consider doing to make exercise part of your normal working



day. And what better way to start than with the journey to work in the morning.

#### Travelling to and from work

The journey to work is an ideal chance to help build up the 30 minutes a day of regular physical activity that you need. It also has added benefits, as you could save on petrol, bus/train/taxi fares and commuter stress.

Walking or cycling to work (or to the train station if you have a longer journey), instead of driving or using public transport, could make a huge difference. If it takes you 15 minutes each way, you would immediately achieve your recommended daily amount of exercise – and it may even take less time than battling through the traffic.

If your employer doesn't already have schemes in place, ask them if they can help encourage walking and cycling to work.

#### At work

There are a number of simple things you can do during the work day to stay active – and remember, the little things add up!

- Take the stairs instead of the lift. If you work on the top floor get off a few floors early.
- Take opportunities to walk around the office. Deliver documents or messages to co-workers in person rather than by email.
- Go for a walk at lunch time and during breaks.
- Maybe join a sports team for lunch-time or after work activities.

### Find an expert

#### Choose to Live Better

[www.choosetolivebetter.com/content/getting-active](http://www.choosetolivebetter.com/content/getting-active)

#### Coillte Outdoors

[www.coillteoutdoors.ie](http://www.coillteoutdoors.ie)

#### Cycle NI

[www.cycleni.com](http://www.cycleni.com)

#### Get Active Your Way

[www.mhfi.org/getactive.pdf](http://www.mhfi.org/getactive.pdf)

#### Get a Life. Get Active

[www.getalifegetactive.com](http://www.getalifegetactive.com)

#### Get Ireland Active

[www.getirelandactive.ie](http://www.getirelandactive.ie)

#### HSE Health Promotion

[www.healthpromotion.ie/health/physical\\_activity](http://www.healthpromotion.ie/health/physical_activity)

#### Irish Sports Council - Irish Trails

[www.irishtrails.ie](http://www.irishtrails.ie)

#### Little Steps - To Getting Active

[www.littlesteps.eu/getting-active/importance](http://www.littlesteps.eu/getting-active/importance)

#### NHS Choices - Health and Fitness

[www.nhs.uk/LiveWell/Fitness](http://www.nhs.uk/LiveWell/Fitness)

#### Outdoor NI

[www.outdoorni.com](http://www.outdoorni.com)

#### Slí na Sláinte - Irish Heart Foundation

[www.irishheart.ie/iopen24/slí-na-sláinte-t-8\\_197\\_200\\_208.html](http://www.irishheart.ie/iopen24/slí-na-sláinte-t-8_197_200_208.html)

#### Walk NI

[www.walkni.com](http://www.walkni.com)

## Sexually-transmitted infections

### The Challenge

If you're under 25 and sexually active, get yourself checked for chlamydia – the most common sexually-transmitted infection.

### The Reason

Chlamydia isn't a Greek island or an edible shell fish – it's actually Ireland's most common sexually-transmitted infection, and it's getting worse. There are often no symptoms, so you won't know you've got it (until you want to have a child and you or your partner aren't able to).

### The Choices

#### Do nothing

You might never know if you are infected, but any female partners will soon find out when they suffer from the commonest cause of infertility and are unable to have children, or suffer a baby developing in the wrong part

of their body (ectopic pregnancy). But then, hey, that's their problem, so that's OK (isn't it?).

#### DIY

Just one tip for preventing sexually-transmitted infections: always practise safer sex. No 'ifs' or 'buts'. Use a condom whenever you have sex because, to be honest, sexually-transmitted infections are a great leveller. They can affect you at any age, whether you're straight or gay, in a long-term relationship or with a casual partner. Symptoms don't always show up immediately, so you could have been infected recently or a long time ago.

Although extra lubrication is sometimes required, do not use oil-based lubricants such as petroleum jelly or baby oil. They will damage most types of condom. There are water-based lubricants available. If you are not sure, ask the chemist – they will not be embarrassed to give advice.

### DOES TAKING THE PILL PROTECT YOU FROM STIs?

STI stands for Sexually Transmitted Infection. The Pill most definitely does not stop women picking up infections. Condoms, on the other hand, will protect you and your partner from almost all nether region nasties, and will prevent unwanted pregnancies. Unfortunately, some men often leave contraception all up to the woman.

## Find an expert

It's all well and good to say use a condom, but mistakes do happen – especially when the spirit is 40% ABV and the flesh is willing. You might not always know that you have an infection, but a simple test will. Even so, watch out for any discharge from the penis. A one-off dose of antibiotic does the trick for chlamydia.

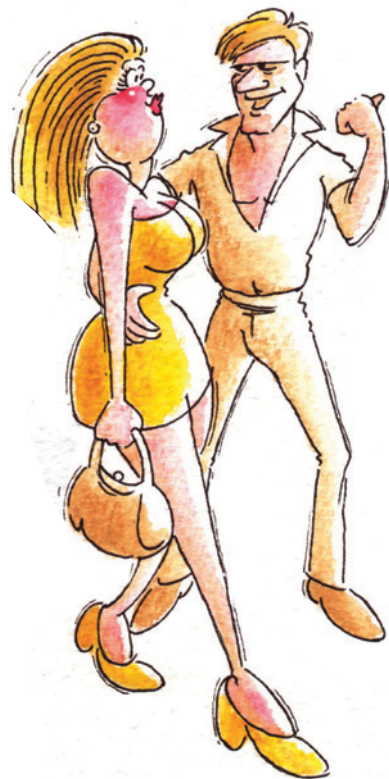
If you haven't practised safe sex, or are at all worried, you can have a confidential check-up, and treatment (if needed), at a genitourinary medicine (GUM) or STI clinic.

For details of your nearest clinic in Northern Ireland visit:

[www.nidirect.gov.uk/genitourinary-medicine-gum-clinics](http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/genitourinary-medicine-gum-clinics)

or, in the Republic of Ireland, call the HSE Helpline on: 1800 459 459.

Alternatively, contact your GP or local family planning clinic. You might also want to look at:



### Irish Family Planning Association

[www.ifpa.ie](http://www.ifpa.ie)

### Spun Out

[www.spunout.ie/health/category/sexually-transmitted-infections](http://www.spunout.ie/health/category/sexually-transmitted-infections)

### Think Contraception

[www.thinkcontraception.ie](http://www.thinkcontraception.ie)

### Your Sexual Health

Tel: 1800 459 459 (Rol)  
[www.yoursexualhealth.ie](http://www.yoursexualhealth.ie)

### Brook

[www.brook.org.uk](http://www.brook.org.uk)

### Dublin AIDS Alliance

[www.dublinaidalliance.ie](http://www.dublinaidalliance.ie)

### Family Planning Association

Tel: 0845 122 8687 (NI)

[www.fpa.org.uk](http://www.fpa.org.uk)

### Gay Men's Health Service

[www.gmhs.ie](http://www.gmhs.ie)

## Local health services

### The Challenge

Find out about the opening hours at your local GP's surgery (and register as a patient if you haven't already done so).

### The Reason

Men use primary care much less than women and tend to wait until things have got really bad before finally turning up. No wonder then that for every cancer both men and women suffer, men come off worse. Remember, primary care includes your local pharmacy.

While you are there, get your blood pressure checked. It might help you to avoid a heart attack or stroke in the future.

### The Choices

#### Do nothing

Sounds reasonable, but sticking your head in the sand isn't going to make any problems go away.

#### DIY

If you have a well-stocked, locked medicine box at home, you may be able to deal with the problem yourself. Useful medicines include paracetamol and ibuprofen for pain, fever and headaches, antihistamines for allergies and hay fever, and indigestion remedy

for heartburn and trapped wind. Ask your pharmacist about which medicines to keep at home.

### Find an expert

#### Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland

[www.hscni.net](http://www.hscni.net)

#### Health Service Executive

[www.hse.ie](http://www.hse.ie)

#### HSE Information Line

1850 24 1850 (Rol)

#### NHS Choices - Symptoms Checker

[www.nhs.uk/SymptomCheckers](http://www.nhs.uk/SymptomCheckers)



## Blood pressure

### The Challenge

Get your blood pressure checked within the next two weeks.

### The Reason

High blood pressure (hypertension) is rightly called the ‘Silent Killer’ because there are very few signs that things are going horribly wrong. Only by measuring your blood pressure will you know if you are in danger. After all, a car tyre can look perfectly fine, yet may be at a dangerous pressure.

Blood pressure varies throughout the day. This is normal, and occurs in everyone, whether they have high blood pressure or not. Blood pressure responds to activity or rest. As you get older, blood pressure tends to rise. High blood pressure is also more common among people of African-Caribbean descent. Diabetes and other illnesses are also associated with raised blood pressure.

When your blood pressure is measured, it is done when the heart beats (systolic pressure) and when the heart relaxes between beats (diastolic pressure). Both pressures are measured in millimetres of mercury, (written as ‘mmHg’). When blood pressure is measured and recorded, the systolic reading is always written before the diastolic figure.

High blood pressure is defined as

a consistent blood pressure of 140/90 mmHg or more, but there are doctors who feel that even this is too high.

### Why is high blood pressure dangerous?

High blood pressure puts a strain on blood vessels all over the body, including vital arteries to the brain. The excess pressure can damage the lining of an artery, allowing blood clots to form and cause blockages. The extra strain may also cause blood vessels to burst, so that blood spills into surrounding tissues. This is what causes a stroke.

### Choices

#### Do nothing

This is without doubt the easiest option and is very popular with men – which may explain why stroke rates are so much higher in men than in women.

#### DIY

After seeing your pharmacist or practice nurse, buy a simple blood pressure monitor. They can be bought very cheaply and are very good. However, you should be checked by an expert every six months or so if you have high blood pressure. Check out the stuff on salt in your diet on page 12 – as it is one of the major causes of high blood pressure and easy to cut down on. Stop shaking the shaker.

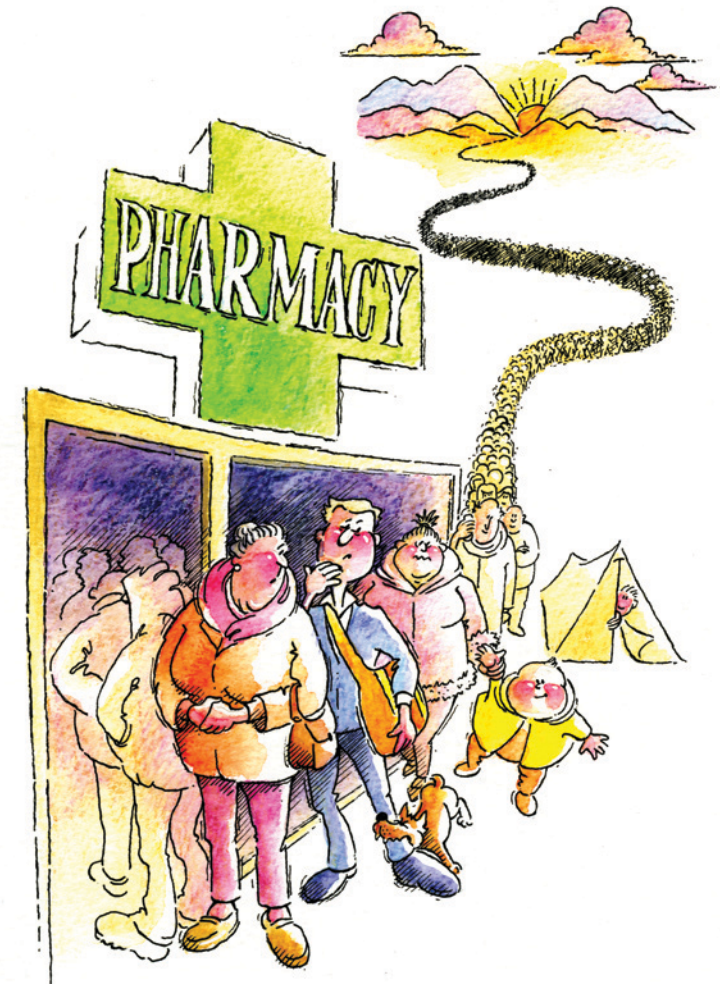
### Find an expert

There are professionals out there just waiting to wrap a cuff around your arm.

### Pharmacists: More than just blue bottles

Pharmacists are highly qualified professionals providing advice on the

use and selection of prescription and over-the-counter (OTC) medicines. They are experts at managing minor ailments and common conditions. This includes lifestyle advice – not least for nutrition, physical activity and stopping smoking – but they will also signpost you to other health and social care services.



**GPs: Family medicine**

General Practitioners (GPs) are available from around 8.30 am to 6.00 pm or later. Calling at other times will put you in touch with an out-of-hours system run by qualified GPs and nurses.

It's always best to see your own doctor if possible. So, unless your need is urgent and cannot wait, make an appointment to be seen by your practice GP. Practices now often offer a huge range of services such as minor surgery, skin care, antenatal care and even diabetic clinics (once only provided by hospital out-patient departments).

**Blood Pressure UK**

[www.bloodpressureuk.org](http://www.bloodpressureuk.org)

**British Heart Foundation**

[www.bhf.org.uk/heart-health/conditions/high-blood-pressure.aspx](http://www.bhf.org.uk/heart-health/conditions/high-blood-pressure.aspx)

**Consensus Action on Salt and Health**

[www.actiononsalt.org.uk](http://www.actiononsalt.org.uk)

**Irish Heart Foundation**

Tel: 1890 432 787 - Heart and Stroke Helpline (Rol)  
[www.irishheart.ie/iopen24/high-blood-pressure-t-66.html](http://www.irishheart.ie/iopen24/high-blood-pressure-t-66.html)

**NI Chest, Heart and Stroke**

[www.nichs.org.uk/397/high-blood-pressure](http://www.nichs.org.uk/397/high-blood-pressure)

**NI Direct**

[www.nidirect.gov.uk/salt](http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/salt)

**The Stroke Association**

Tel: 0303 303 3100 (NI)  
[www.stroke.org.uk](http://www.stroke.org.uk)

## Stress

**The Challenge**

Stressed out? ... Walk out before you blow up. Removing yourself from the situation gives you the space to work out the best thing to do.

**The Reason**

Let's be honest, life without stress is impossible. It can even help you to perform better and give you a buzz. But a build-up of pressure without the chance to recover can lead to dangerous stress. Far from being helpful, now it can actually harm your health and even those around you.

Few of us are unfamiliar with feelings of stress such as being worried, tense or feeling unable to cope. But hang on in there. The good news is that there are things you can do to deal with, and manage, stress at home and at work – especially with support from family and friends.

**Stress signals**

Although we all have to deal with stress of some sort either at work or home, people vary in how much stress they can take before it has an effect on their life.

Watch out for the common stress signals including:

- Eating more or less than normal.
- Mood swings.
- Poor concentration.

- Feeling tense.
  - Feeling useless.
  - Anxiety.
  - Not sleeping properly, especially waking early and not getting back to sleep.
  - Tiredness.
  - Poor memory/forgetfulness.
- Part of the problem is not recognising our own stress signals and expecting too much of ourselves.

**Why bother?**

Being stressed can trigger common mental health problems like anxiety and depression. However it can also bring on:

- Back pain.
- Indigestion.
- Irritable bowel syndrome.
- Psoriasis.



- Migraine.
- Tension headaches.

Thankfully, there are several things that you can do to help yourself deal with and prevent stress, and to improve how you feel both physically and mentally in the long run.

## The Choices

### Do nothing

'You Cannot Be Serious'.

### DIY

#### 1. Time out

It can be hard to be rational when you are feeling very stressed, which is why it's important to take some time out.

##### Quick fix

Getting yourself out of a stressful situation, even for a few moments, can give you the space you need to feel more able to tackle the problem. That's easy to say, but often hard to manage.

##### Long term

Taking time out from your everyday routine may help you to deal with, and avoid, stress. If you have young children, it is important to get a break. Try organising a babysitter for an evening, or take it in turns with your partner to have time to yourselves. If you work, try to avoid doing long hours, take proper holidays, and take breaks away from your work area each day.

#### 2. Work out

Exercise really helps to blow off steam and prevents stress-linked illness.



##### Quick fix

Go for a quick walk around the block – this can help to clear your head so that you can tackle problems better.

##### Long term

Go for at least 30 minutes of activity a day. This doesn't have to be done all at once, and can be done in bouts of 10 minutes. Try building activity into your daily routine like cycling or walking to the shops, taking the stairs instead of lifts, going for a walk, and playing games with the children.

#### 3. Chill out

Getting enough sleep, as well as relaxing your mind, will help you to cope with stress. Avoid sleeping tablets – as they can be addictive and make things even worse.

##### Quick fix

Simple relaxation techniques such as deep breathing can be an effective way of helping you to deal with stress.

##### Long term

Plan time to relax, even if it's just having a long bath or listening to

music. Try to have a good night's sleep. Relaxation techniques can be useful for a lot of people in helping them to feel more able to cope. There are many types of relaxation classes available such as meditation, yoga and Pilates.

#### 4. Leave it out

Avoid taking refuge in smoking, junk food or alcohol! This won't help your stress levels. Avoid too many caffeinated and sugary drinks: caffeine may make you feel more anxious, and bursts of sugar can cause mood swings.

##### Quick fix

Drink plenty of water. This will help you to concentrate better and may stop you getting stress headaches.

##### Long term

Improving your diet and drinking plenty of water will increase your body's resistance to stress. It's important to make time for proper meals to help you stay energised. Talk over meals. This is a time to unwind. Eat, rather than just stuff your neck.

#### 5. Talk it out

Just talking about things that are causing you stress may help you to see things in a different light. It can help you to find a way forward in tackling practical problems that may be causing you stress.

##### Talk with friends or family

Going it alone is never a good idea. Even one other person to talk to can help

you deal with stress. Talk with family or friends about how you are feeling – they may be able to offer their support.

##### Talk with colleagues

It's hard to believe, but work is generally good for our well-being. However, at times, it can be stressful. Us men tend not to want to talk about work problems, but it might just save your brain power by chatting with your mates.

Most employers these days want to hear of problems before they lose a valuable employee. Some trade unions also have people specially trained to deal with workplace stress. If your company has a counselling or occupational health service, then use it. They are there to help you, and the service is confidential. Research shows that people who experience work-based stress benefit from these services.

## Find an expert

### Talk with a health professional

You can speak to a GP or practice nurse for advice and support.

### Minding Your Head

[www.mindingyourhead.info](http://www.mindingyourhead.info)

### The Samaritans

Tel: 08457 90 90 90 (NI)  
Freephone: 116 123 (RoI)  
[www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)

### Your Mental Health

[www.yourmentalhealth.ie](http://www.yourmentalhealth.ie)

## Smoking

### The Challenge

Get a mate to give up smoking with you (if you've already given up, the challenge is to try to stop looking so smug about it).

### The Reason

Okay, so you've heard it all before. But don't turn the page yet. This advice could add years to your life – never mind helping to improve the way you look, feel and smell.

Smoking is the single greatest cause of death. FULL STOP. It has killed more people than both world wars put together. It can also affect your children and those around you. Smoking causes lung cancer – even the tobacco companies now accept this simple fact. It can also lead to all sorts of serious health problems, including heart disease, stroke, various other cancers (such as bladder, mouth and throat cancers), in addition to bronchitis and emphysema.

Also, did you know that the risk of impotence is almost double in male smokers aged 40–69 years compared with non-smokers?

OK, enough of the bad news. Check this out: what you may not know is that the very moment you stop smoking your health will start to improve.



- After only 20 minutes of not smoking, your blood pressure and pulse return to normal.
- In just 48 hours, your body is nicotine-free, and carbon monoxide (a poison) is cleared from your body.
- Within 2 to 12 weeks, your blood circulation improves and you'll feel noticeably fitter.
- Best of all, within five years your risk of lung cancer will be much, much lower. And your risk may be halved by the time you reach your tenth year of being tobacco free.

### DID YOU KNOW? ...

- If your lungs were opened up and spread out fully, they'd cover an area the size of a tennis court!
- As your heart beats, your blood passes through your lungs and picks up oxygen which it takes to all parts of your body.
- When you exercise, your breathing rate goes up because your body needs more oxygen so that it can work harder.
- You feel 'puffed out' when your lungs can't supply your body with oxygen quickly enough.
- Regular exercise helps to keep your lungs fit and healthy.
- Coughing is a protective reflex – it's the body's effort to get rid of unwanted irritants from the windpipe and the lungs.

### The Choices

#### Do nothing

Very bad idea.

- Lung cancer was rare until tobacco hit the scene. Some things will not go away in a puff of smoke.
- In Northern Ireland, lung cancer is the second most common cancer for men, while in the Republic of Ireland it is the third most common cancer (after excluding non-melanoma skin cancer in each area).
- On the island of Ireland, approximately 1,800 men are diagnosed with lung

cancer every year. Sadly, more Irish men and women die from lung cancer than any other type of cancer.

- Lung cancer is most common between the ages of 65 and 75, but much younger people can die from it as well.
- The more cigarettes smoked, and the younger the age at which smoking started, the greater the risk.
- Inhalation of tobacco smoke by non-smokers – 'passive smoking' – can also cause cancer.

#### DIY

What triggers the 'time for a cigarette' habit? Is it:

- When you wake up?
- With the first cup of tea/coffee?
- Talking on the phone?
- Watching TV?
- With an alcoholic drink?
- After a meal?
- While reading?
- When you are stressed?

These are only some examples, and you might have others. Try keeping a diary for a few days to record your smoking patterns. This can help you to understand when and why you smoke, and plan what to do instead.

#### Find an expert

How do I stop? ... There are a few ways to stop smoking:

- Using effective treatments to assist the process.
- Using experienced back-up services and support groups.

**Cutting down and cold turkey**

The problem with tapering off is that the numbers tend to creep up again. Therefore, it is better to stop outright. Make sure that you are fully prepared to manage without smoking: many fail because they jump into the task before they are ready. Just quitting with no assistance is hard, and is less likely to work in the long term to keep you tobacco free. Consider using other means to help you as well.

**Things that can help you ...****Medical advice**

Prescription and non-prescription aids (see your GP, practice nurse or pharmacist).

**Stop smoking services**

You can get a tailored support package (including medications) to help you stop. These might include one-to-one advice sessions and stop-smoking support groups.

Remember, that stopping is better than just thinking about it. People succeed every day - so can you!

**Go smoke free**

[www.nhs.uk/gosmokefree](http://www.nhs.uk/gosmokefree)

**National Smokers' Quitline**

Tel: 1800 201 203 (RoI)  
[www.quit.ie](http://www.quit.ie)

**QUIT PLAN**

Whichever you go for, it will be easier with some sort of Quit Plan.

- Get information. Go online, make a call, visit your surgery or pharmacy. Arm yourself with as much information as possible about the most effective ways available to help you stop and stay stopped.
- Set a day and date to stop. Tell all your friends and relatives – they will support you.
- Like deep sea diving, always take a buddy with you. Get someone to give up with you. You will reinforce each other's willpower.
- Clear the house and your pockets of any cigarette packets, papers or matches.
- Map out your progress on a chart or calendar.
- Keep the money you save in a separate container.
- Chew on a carrot. It will give you something to do with your mouth and hands.
- Ask your friends not to smoke around you.

**Want to Stop**

Tel: 0808 812 8008 (NI)  
[www.want2stop.info](http://www.want2stop.info)

**Skin****The Challenge**

Show a doctor that thing on your body that's bothering you.

**The Reason**

There are basically two types of skin cancer:

- Non-melanoma is the most common form of skin cancer. It's commonly found on the forehead, tip of the chin, nose, ears, forearms and hands – basically, all the exposed bits.
- Malignant Melanoma is the more serious form of skin cancer. Although it is much less common, it is on the increase. It often appears as a changing mole or freckle but it can also develop from normal-looking skin.

**The Choices****Do nothing**

You could also swing a dead cat round your head in a graveyard at midnight.

**DIY**

Watch out for:

- Size: bigger than the butt end of a pencil (more than 6 mm/quarter inch diameter).
- Colour variety: shades of tan, brown, black and sometimes red, blue or white.
- Shape: ragged or scalloped edge and one half unlike the other.

Also watch out for:

- A new growth or sore that does not heal within four weeks.
- A spot or sore that continues to itch, hurt, crust, scab or bleed.
- Constant skin ulcers that are not explained by other causes.

**NOT A LOT OF PEOPLE KNOW THIS**

- Skin cancer is one of the most common cancers on the island of Ireland and not just in women.
- Your lifetime risk as a man of developing skin cancer is one in eight.
- Even cloudy days can deliver 90% of the sun's dangerous ultraviolet (UV) rays.
- Some football shirts are so thin that they let almost all the UV rays through.
- Skin damage remains after your sunburn fades. It builds up under the skin, just like rust under bodywork paint. It can come back to haunt you in later years.
- Virtually all the risk comes from over-exposure to the sun and sun-beds...

So cover up and close up!



But skin cancer doesn't always have these features. Check your skin regularly, and watch out for any changes. Many skin changes are harmless, but a quick check with your doctor or pharmacist can save your skin - as skin cancer is much easier to treat when it is caught early.

### Find an expert

#### Sunscreens and smokescreens

People get confused over sunscreens, and can damage their skin by choosing the wrong sunscreen for them or not using enough. If in doubt, ask your pharmacist.

Read your sunscreen label and make sure that it has both an SPF and a star rating. The SPF (Sun Protection Factor) tells you how much protection you are getting from UVB rays. The star \*\*\*\*\* rating shows the level of protection against UVA rays.

Try to buy a sunscreen that is at least SPF 15 and has a 4 star rating. Apply it generously half an hour before you go out in the sun, and remember to take it with you so you can reapply regularly.

Remember – wearing sunscreen does not mean that you can stay out in the sun longer. Sunscreen offers some protection, but it should be used alongside covering up and spending time in the shade to give your skin the protection it needs.

#### Action Cancer

[www.actioncancer.org](http://www.actioncancer.org)

### GET SUN SMART

Here are some simple steps to help you enjoy the sun safely ...

- Stay in the shade between 11am and 3pm - as the sun is most dangerous in the middle of the day.
- Find shade under an umbrella, tree, canopy, tent or go indoors when the sun is at its most dangerous.
- Make sure that you never burn. Sunburn can double your risk of skin cancer.
- Always cover up. Sunscreen is not enough. Wear a shirt, wide-brimmed hat, long trousers and wraparound sunglasses (as your eyes can get sun damaged too).
- Take extra care with children. Their skin is especially delicate, so always keep babies in the shade.
- Use a sunscreen which is at least a Factor 15, and has a high star rating. Apply it generously 30 minutes before you go outside.
- Reapply your sunscreen often.

#### Cancer Focus Northern Ireland

Tel: 0800 783 3339 (NI)  
[www.cancerfocusni.org](http://www.cancerfocusni.org)

#### Care in the Sun

[www.careinthesun.org](http://www.careinthesun.org)

#### Irish Cancer Society

Helpline: 1800 200 700  
[www.cancer.ie/cancer-information/skin-cancer](http://www.cancer.ie/cancer-information/skin-cancer)

#### Marie Keating Foundation

[www.mariekeating.ie](http://www.mariekeating.ie)

## Back

### The Challenge

If you've got backache, don't let it become a pain in the ass. Get it sorted.

### The Reason

If you've ever suffered from a bad back you'll know just how painful and restrictive it can be – and, because other people cannot 'see' the pain, you tend to get little sympathy. Bad backs are also one of the greatest causes of sickness-related absence from work.

If your job involves lifting heavy objects, sitting at a desk or being immobile for long periods of time, checking your back makes good sense. Chronic back pain can result from bad posture, poor lifting technique or accidental injury.

Being overweight is also a major cause of back problems, not least because it can reduce activity and flexibility. However, it also puts added strain on the muscles, ligaments and bones of the spine. Smoking, too, can significantly reduce bone strength – which is another good reason for quitting.

Adult bone is constantly being altered and renewed. This needs plenty of calcium. The body can only store this vital mineral in the bone itself, so fresh calcium is needed on a daily basis. The best sources are dairy products such as

milk, cheese and yoghurt, but bread is also good, as are fish with edible bones (such as sardines) and green leafy vegetables.

Not only bones can be the cause of back pain. The back is supported by hundreds of different muscles, including those that also support the arms, legs and head. All of them can be strained or overworked, leaving the spine vulnerable to damage. In fact, most back pain comes from injured muscle or their tendons rather than the spine itself.

### The Choices

#### Do nothing

Your decision, but watch out for straws and camels' backs. You have a staggering 80% chance of developing low back pain at some point in your life. Even stooping to pick up straws may be a problem.

#### DIY

Most back pain is not due to any serious disease. The acute pain usually improves within days or weeks. Sometimes aches and pains can last for quite a long time. It will settle eventually, but no one can predict exactly when:

- Most people can get back into action quite quickly, even though they may still have some pain.

- The sooner you get moving and back to normal activities, the sooner you will feel better.
- Rest for more than a day or two can prolong pain and disability.
- How you handle back pain in the early stages is very important to the outcome.
- The longer you remain off work, the less likely you are to return.

#### When standing for long periods

- Head – keep it up and in line with your spine.
- Shoulders – relax and pull in your shoulder blades.
- Pelvis – keep your hips level while tucking-in your tailbone to line up with your spine.
- Knees – keep slightly bent (not locked).
- Feet – share the weight evenly.

#### When driving

- Head – use a head restraint at all times.
- Lower back – adjust the seat (or use a small cushion) to give maximum support, and sit well back without slouching.
- Arms – slightly bent.
- Legs – adjust the seat for ease of reaching the pedals (while allowing maximum visibility).
- Take a break - when stopped at traffic lights, relax by bending your legs. Remember to pull into a safe parking place for a good stretch now and again.

#### When lifting heavy objects

- Keep your back straight and use your legs to take the strain.
- Know your limits: if it's a two-man job, then don't be a one man bad back. It's not always just weight, but also the awkward shape or location of a load that can cause problems.
- Make sure you can deal with the shape, clear the area, and warn people before you attempt a lift. If the forklifts or trolleys are being used by someone else, wait until they are free – machines are much easier to repair than people.

#### When using a computer

- VDU (visual display unit) – ensure the screen is free from glare and you can clearly see the image. Glare can cause headaches.
- Chair – adjust your chair so that your eyes are level with the top of the VDU, your forearms are approximately parallel to the desk, and your legs can be moved freely with no pressure from the edge of your seat on the backs of your legs and knees.
- Keyboard – adjust the keyboard so that you can rest your hands and wrists in front of the keyboard, and keep your wrists straight while keying. Poor wrist posture can also lead to repetitive strain injury (RSI) or carpal tunnel syndrome – both of which are extremely painful and debilitating).

- Mouse – adjust the mouse so that it is within easy reach, and can be used with the wrist straight while supporting your forearm on the desk.
- Take mini breaks – don't sit in the same position for too long. Make sure that you change your posture as often as possible, and take short regular breaks.

#### Find an expert

If the pain persists, or you can't remain in work, you should consult your doctor. He or she will probably advise you to continue with analgesic tablets and keep mobile. You may be advised to have some physiotherapy. Your doctor is unlikely to order further investigations such as x-rays, MRI scans or referral to a specialist unless the pain has persisted for several weeks, is very severe, or you have certain signs or symptoms.

Consult your doctor if the following applies to you:

- Unexplained weight loss or fever.
- History of cancer, HIV or long duration use of steroids.
- Difficulty passing or controlling urine.
- Numbness around your back passage or genital area.
- Pain, numbness, pins and needles, or weakness in your leg.
- Unsteadiness on your feet.

X-rays and MRI scans can detect serious back problems, but may

be of little use in simple back pain. However, if they don't show anything serious, that's good news. In older people, they may show evidence of 'degeneration'. This sounds bad, but all it means is normal 'wear and tear'.

It is important to stay at work if you can, as this helps you to keep active and recover from the pain. If you do a lot of lifting, or have other risk factors in your job, talk to your supervisor or boss and tell them about tasks that you will find difficult to do initially.

A gentle return to full activity is better than weeks of lying in bed with a door under the mattress. In fact, lying flat in a bed for three weeks only makes things worse – as it weakens the supporting muscles. Traction (putting huge weights on the legs) belongs in a museum of horrors. It would take a double-decker bus to counter the strength of the back muscles!

#### Arthritis Care

Tel: 0808 800 4050 (NI)  
www.arthritiscare.org.uk

#### Arthritis Ireland

Tel: 1890 252 846 (RoI)  
www.arthritisireland.ie

#### Backcare

www.backcare.org.uk

#### Health and Safety Authority

www.hsa.ie

#### Health and Safety Executive

www.hse.gov.uk/msd/backpain

**BACK TO BASICS – EASING THE PAIN**

- Take simple painkillers such as paracetamol or ibuprofen. Always follow the manufacturer's instructions for the correct dose. You should not take ibuprofen if you have a history of stomach ulcer, indigestion, asthma, or kidney disease, or if you are taking warfarin.
- Applying something cold to the painful area can numb the pain and limit the effects of any swelling. You can make a cold pack by wrapping ice cubes or a bag of frozen peas in a wet tea towel. Apply the cold pack for no more than 20 minutes at a time. Repeat every 2-3 hours. To avoid burning your skin, make sure you wrap the cold pack in a tea towel before applying it. If you use a packet of frozen peas as an ice pack, you can reuse the same packet several times. However, it's important to remember that you should not eat the contents if they have been defrosted and then refrozen.
- Applying gentle warmth to the painful area can help ease muscle pain. Try a heat pack, a hot water bottle or a hot shower. To avoid burning your skin, make sure you don't apply anything too hot and check the skin regularly. You should not apply heat to a new injury – wait at least 48 hours before using heat to ease the pain.
- Bed rest is not helpful for lower back pain. Try to continue with your normal activities as far as possible.
- Keep as active as possible and take gentle exercise until the pain eases. Exercises such as walking, swimming and gentle stretching are especially good for back pain, and will help to prevent injury in the future.
- Keep a good posture. Try to walk or stand with your head and shoulders slightly back.
- If you are sitting at a desk, make sure that your chair is at the right height for the desk. Your feet should be able to rest flat on the floor, or on a foot rest, with your knees bent at 90 degrees.
- If you are reading, make sure that the book is at eye level, so that you do not need to stoop.
- If you are sitting or driving for a long period, make sure you have a seat that supports your back and neck. Take regular breaks to stretch and walk around if possible.
- In bed, use a firm mattress that matches and supports the natural curves of your spine. Lie on your side with your knees bent. Avoid lying on your stomach.
- If you are overweight, there is extra stress on your back. Losing weight should help reduce your risk of back pain.