



TAKE CONTROL OF FESTIVE STRESS

Christmas can be a stressful time. **Sue Bradley** meets Welsh cardiac charity leader Jacky Miles MBE to gather some food for thought on looking after our hearts

The festive season is a wonderful time, with families and friends coming together to enjoy each other's company, feast on delicious food and share presents.

Yet while it's a period of great cheer, women in particular often find themselves with an ever-growing "to do" list that can add a big helping of pressure to their already busy lives.

Jacky Miles MBE is keen to raise awareness of the symptoms of heart disease in both men and women and the role that stress can play in tipping the balance.

She wants to make it easier for both sexes to recognise the early signs and risk factors that can lead to a cardiac event, and to seek treatment if they experience them. In particular she's keen to encourage anyone who has suffered a heart attack, had stents fitted to the coronary arteries, undergone heart surgery or been diagnosed with heart failure to make the most of the rehabilitation sessions they're offered.

"These can lead to less hospitalisation and they save lives and lead to an improved quality of life," she explains.

Jacky was a nurse for more than 40 years, spending much of that time working for Aneurin Bevan University Health Board in intensive care and then in cardiology as a nurse specialist.

She was closely involved in pioneering work to set up Cardiac Rehabilitation sessions for patients who had suffered heart failure, using money from the British Heart Foundation and Nevill Hall's Thrombosis Fund to kick start the project by paying for fitness trainers, counsellors and equipment. Subsequently she undertook a PhD with the University of South Wales to study the benefits of this initiative for patients with heart failure.



Jacky's interest in heart health continues through her role as chairman of the North Gwent Cardiac Rehabilitation and Aftercare Charity, and she remains a visiting professor at the university.

Around 340,000 people in Wales – a tenth of the population – live with heart and circulatory diseases, which cause around 9,100 – or one in four – deaths every year.

They tend to occur in men aged 45 and over, and women from 55, with genetics known to play a role in increasing risk. Those whose parents have suffered heart disease are encouraged to visit their GPs to get their cholesterol levels checked when they reach middle age.

Lifestyle can also increase the risk of a cardiac event, with diets rich in saturated fats and refined carbohydrates, lack of physical activity, sleep deprivation, smoking, a history of high blood pressure and medical conditions such as diabetes, obesity, early menopause and rheumatoid arthritis all being contributing factors.

Yet while symptoms that manifest themselves in men are generally well known, signs in women such as fatigue, insomnia, pains in the back or neck, a racing heart and a hot and flushed feeling are often mistakenly attributed to the menopause.

Scientists are still studying the reasons why stress, anxiety and depression can have an impact on heart health, but it's known to increase blood pressure and cause hypertension, which can lead to heart disease

and plaque build-up in the coronary arteries. At the same time it can raise the level of cortisol (a stress hormone) circulating in the body, which can affect clotting and how the body controls involuntary functions such as heart rate and blood pressure.

Stress can also lead to unhealthy coping mechanisms, such as eating too much, substance abuse and not exercising.

Jacky's advice for reducing stress, and its role as a contributing factor to heart attacks, is to set realistic expectations.

"Try taking a few moments to write down what would make the holidays an enjoyable time with those you love, and let go of the things that add stress and no joy," she says.

At the same time she encourages everybody to take a close look at what they eat and build more time for exercise into their daily routine.

"We can all make changes to our lives to help our hearts," she says. "With a New Year approaching it's a resolution we can all make to ensure happier and healthier lives which means we'll be around to enjoy many more Christmases with our families and friends in the future."

• *Don't miss the Cardiac Christmas Market at Llanfoist Village Hall (NP7 9LP) on Sunday, December 11, from 2pm to 5pm. This event, which is raising funds for the North Gwent Cardiac Rehabilitation and Aftercare Charity, will feature gorgeous gift ideas from local makers, activities for children, games and refreshments.*

