**Men’s health: global perspectives and priorities**

*Our Vitality experts agree: cardiovascular disease is the most pressing global health challenge for men. A rising concern for healthcare professionals to also keep an eye on is men’s mental health.*

Latest figures from Global Burden of Disease data[[1]](#footnote-1) shows that just under 18 million people die from cardiovascular disease (known as CVD) each year with the majority of these deaths due to heart attack and stroke. While CVD affects both men and women, men generally develop CVD at a younger age and have a higher likelihood of developing coronary heart disease than women[[2]](#footnote-2). Looking at just the United States, this means 1 in every 4 male deaths is caused by heart disease[[3]](#footnote-3).

“We see similar trends globally,” begins Dr Jonathan Broomberg, CEO of Vitality Health International. “More men have heart attacks[[4]](#footnote-4) and half of the men who die suddenly of heart disease have displayed no warning signs[[5]](#footnote-5). While we all tend to think of heart disease as something that happens to older people, we’re seeing it start earlier in life with many men in their thirties and forties having heart attacks.”

“The Global Burden of Disease dataset is hugely valuable to us at Vitality when it comes to analysing differences in health risks across **countries, age and gender,” adds Dr** Broomberg. “It offers a comprehensive picture of **morbidity and mortality** to help us understand and quantify health loss from all health risk factors. In this way, we can see where we need to improve awareness or access to healthcare as health professionals. With Vitality’s global reach now across 40 markets, impacting over 30 million lives, mapping these health risks for our membership base – across geographies – is an important part of what our team does.”

**Vitality vs. NCDs**

“What’s helpful to highlight here is that these CVDs, and other non-communicable diseases (NCDs), can be prevented,” adds Shaun Matisonn, Deputy CEO of Vitality Global. “Making some key lifestyle changes can lower your risk of getting CVD and, if you’re diagnosed with it already, getting – and staying – healthy reduces the risk of it progressing.”

NCDs, which include heart disease, stroke, cancer, diabetes and chronic lung disease, are responsible for 74% of all deaths worldwide[[6]](#footnote-6), so urgent interventions are needed to promote healthier living. “Our goal is to help address this through the Vitality programme,” continues Matisonn. “Many of the major health risks that men face can be prevented with a healthy lifestyle: more exercise, better nutrition, managing stress, quitting smoking and zero-to-moderate alcohol consumption. If we can get this right globally, which is no small feat, we can help save millions of lives.”

The science behind the Vitality programme is to encourage ongoing behaviour change so that members live longer, healthier lives – in terms of lifespan, and just as importantly, healthspan[[7]](#footnote-7) which is defined as the period of life spent in good health, free from chronic disease. Vitality does this by offering a combination of knowledge, access to fitness and nutrition partners, as well as financial incentives that increase as members engage with the programme.

“We want to make the healthy choice, the easy choice and our global teams – from product development right through to marketing and communications – look for ways to remove barriers, even just the perception of barriers, to making the healthier decision,” notes Matisonn.

In addition to CVD, lung cancer is another big concern when it comes to male mortality. “The vast majority of lung cancer cases are due to smoking[[8]](#footnote-8), and we offer a range of tools to help support our members to successfully quit,” says Ari Zadikov, Head of Technical Marketing for Vitality Global. “As part of the programme, Vitality subsidises access to global smoking cessation partners.”

“The good news here,” Zadikov adds, “is that it’s never too late to stop smoking because your lungs start to recover almost as soon as you quit. Within minutes of smoking your last cigarette, your body starts to recover, 1 to 2 years after quitting your risk of having a heart attack decreases significantly and after 10 years, your risk of lung cancer is about half than that of a smoker[[9]](#footnote-9).”

Here, the panel turn to another main health risk behaviour: a lack of physical activity. “If you don’t exercise regularly, you may be at higher risk of developing high blood pressure, high cholesterol levels and becoming overweight,” says Jamie Monk, Sports Science and Physical Activity Specialist at Vitality UK. “All of these are risk factors for CVD. Also, men with a waist measurement of 94cm (about 37 inches) or more are at an increased risk of heart disease and stroke, as well as type 2 diabetes[[10]](#footnote-10).”

Research continues to show that regular exercise helps to keep the heart and lungs healthy. And, when combined with a healthy diet, exercise also helps with maintaining a healthy weight which further reduces a man’s health risks.

“Current World Health Organization guidelines[[11]](#footnote-11),” says Jonathan Kibble, Physical Activity Specialist for Vitality UK, “suggest that the minimum level of physical activity for adults is 150 minutes per week (30 minutes a day) of moderate-intensity exercise. Whether men complete strength training with free weights, or a brisk walk, they need this moderate-intensity exercise to ultimately improve their health outcomes.”

The panel point out that heart rate is also important. The target heart rate for adults during moderate intensity activities is about 50-85% of the maximum heart rate and you can work this out by subtracting your age from 220[[12]](#footnote-12). “For example, I’m 30 years old, so this subtracted from 220 gives me my maximum heart rate of around 190,” says Kibble. “In addition to earning Vitality points for tracking my daily steps, I get boosted points for heart rate workouts where I’m targeting specific heart rates. This improves my overall heart health – and we know these types of incentives work in nudging longer-term exercise engagement.”

A global study[[13]](#footnote-13) by independent research institute *RAND Europe* backs this up. In this research on Vitality Active Rewards, a weekly goal-setting mechanism linked to personalised exercise targets, results showed that incentivising physical activity led to increased activity levels. The Vitality programme shows across all its markets that this type of incentivising motivates members to get active – and keep getting active.

**Prioritising preventative care**

Another key part to addressing diseases of lifestyle affecting men’s health is to promote regular health checks and screenings. “When we spot disease early, it’s easiest to treat,” says Jonathan Dugas, PhD, Health Scientist and Vitality consultant.

“Vitality data through our global partnerships with health and life insurers continues to show the benefits of routine screenings,” adds Dugas. “People who get regular health checks are more likely to detect potential disease or underlying health conditions. Early detection is crucial to better long-term outcomes – easier treatment options, less severe illness and a greater chance of recovery.”

To promote these regular health screenings, the Vitality programme encourages both online assessments and an annual Vitality Health Check. “The Vitality Age is an online assessment that measures how healthy you are in relation to your actual age,” explains Dr Deepak Patel, Vitality South Africa Clinician. “It evaluates your healthy eating, exercise and stress management habits and helps you learn more about healthy lifestyle choices.” Together with the Vitality Age assessment, a Vitality Health Check can identify your risk of developing a chronic condition. It includes four tests – blood pressure, cholesterol, glucose and a weight assessment – as well as a non-smoker’s declaration. “These screenings show you how healthy you are right now and what you can do to stay healthy tomorrow,” Dr Patel adds.

We also know that preventative health check-ups are associated with healthier men. These visits can lead to life-threatening diseases being caught early enough to prevent the loss of life.” The question the panel now turn to is: why are men lagging behind when it comes to preventative care?

“Anecdotally, we’ll probably all agree here that men are less likely to visit a doctor than women for health checks and screenings,” says Patel. “This, unfortunately, is also reflected in our Vitality South Africa data with more women than men completing their Vitality Health Check last year.”

“Perhaps this is tied to greater overconfidence and optimism bias amongst men, but whatever the reason,” continues Patel, “our role at Vitality is to help debunk these myths and re-position preventative health as the strong, powerful choice.”

Zadikov adds that there are exciting technological developments in the male healthcare space that will start to mean easier diagnoses for diseases such as prostate cancer. One such innovation is a new calculation tool to help predict men’s prostate cancer risk. Published in the *Journal of Clinical Oncology[[14]](#footnote-14)*, researchers were able to identity moderate to high-risk prostate cancer patients prior to their diagnosis. They did this by using a risk model that inputted both family history of prostate cancer and the genetic variants associated with a higher risk of this type of cancer. “Tools like this can help us identify the men who would benefit most from having routine prostate cancer screenings – and through Vitality we could encourage and incentivise this screening to make it more likely they’d do it.”

# **‘Man up’ is not the answer**

For decades, research on men’s health has focused almost exclusively on physical health with good health linked to physical markers such as breathing rate, blood pressure and blood sugar levels. Now, the spotlight is shifting to men’s mental health as a significant component of overall health – and one that critically needs more awareness and action around the world.

Researchers at the National Institute of Mental Health[[15]](#footnote-15) estimate that tens of millions of men globally suffer from depressive disorders, including suicidal thoughts, yet only a small percentage of men seek help to address this.

“Based on the most recent global data from the World Health Organization (WHO)[[16]](#footnote-16),” says Jason Gaskell, Senior Health Insurance Specialist at Vitality Global, “there are around 703 000 suicide deaths worldwide, every year, and the large majority of these are men. The issue of suicide is not only deeply intricate and sensitive, but it also has multifaceted causes and implications. However, the fact that we witness a male suicide rate nearly twice that of females signifies a deep-seated problem.”

“Further insights from the National Institute of Mental Health reveal that males tend to be more reluctant to talk about their mental health and are less likely to seek out formal mental health support when it’s needed[[17]](#footnote-17)”, notes Gaskell.

Gaskell’s hope is that as mental health awareness grows, society will gain a broader understanding of the experiences of men with conditions such as anxiety, depression, and burnout. He also anticipates the fading of the stigma previously associated with men and mental health.

## Better MENtal health education

The first step in addressing mental health issues, researchers say, is enhancing general awareness and education around the topic itself.

Gaskell highlights that men need to recognise that mental health has a significant impact on their ability to cope with everyday interactions and activities. “It shapes our thinking, feelings, and ultimately our actions, including how well we can manage stress. When our mental health is compromised, stress can overwhelm us, further eroding our mental well-being. This escalation in turn increases our anxiety and depression levels, which can have consequential effects on our physical health.”

“Research has found,” Gaskell adds, “that fostering mental stability can be linked to three pillars: people (social support), place (environment and interventions) and purpose (internal motivation).” Vitality is committed to continually enriching their wellbeing programme with expert mental health advice and actionable tips to help drive positive behavioural change for men’s health.

The concluding message from the experts is that consistency is crucial when it comes to men’s health. Men need to feel better supported, have easy access to health tests and screenings, and need to be encouraged to adopt health behaviours that are not just once-off. In this way, the Vitality programme can best nudge behavioural change that is sustainable and with health benefits that are long-term.

*For more information about Vitality’s evidence-based approach that encourages and rewards members for healthier living, visit the* [*Vitality Global*](https://www.vitalityglobal.com/) *website.*

1. Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation. 2023. Global Burden of Disease Data. [Link](https://www.healthdata.org/gbd). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. British Medical Journal. 2017. Sex differences in coronary heart disease and stroke mortality. [Link](https://gh.bmj.com/content/2/2/e000298). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2022. Men and Heart Disease. [Link](https://www.cdc.gov/heartdisease/men.htm#:~:text=How%20does%20heart%20disease%20affect,in%20every%204%20male%20deaths.). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. National Library of Medicine. 2022. Sudden Cardiac Death. [Link](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK507854/). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2022. Men and Heart Disease. [Link](https://www.cdc.gov/heartdisease/men.htm#:~:text=How%20does%20heart%20disease%20affect,in%20every%204%20male%20deaths.). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. World Health Organization. Noncommunicable diseases. [Link](https://www.who.int/health-topics/noncommunicable-diseases#tab=tab_1). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Vitality Global. 2021. Healthy Futures Report. [Link](https://d16pi0tqkfzkv3.cloudfront.net/assets/microsites/vitality-international/pdfs/healthy-futures.pdf). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2022. What Are the Risk Factors for Lung Cancer? [Link](https://www.cdc.gov/cancer/lung/basic_info/risk_factors.htm#:~:text=This%20animated%20infographic%20shows%20the,90%25%20of%20lung%20cancer%20deaths.). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2022. Smoking and Cancer. [Link](https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/campaign/tips/diseases/cancer.html#:~:text=Within%2010%2D15%20years%20after,lung%20cancer%20drops%20by%20half.&text=Within%2020%20years%20after%20you,cancer%20drops%20by%20about%20half.). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Heart & Stroke Foundation Canada. Healthy weight and waist. [Link](https://www.heartandstroke.ca/healthy-living/healthy-weight/healthy-weight-and-waist). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. World Health Organization. Fact sheet: physical activity. [Link](https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/physical-activity). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Johns Hopkins Medicine. Understanding your target heart rate. [Link](https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention/understanding-your-target-heart-rate). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. RAND Europe. Incentives and physical activity. 2018. [Link](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2870.html). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Journal of Clinical Oncology. 2018. Next-generation prostate cancer risk calculator. [Link](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5937391/). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. National Institute of Mental Health. 2017. Men and depression. [Link](https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/men-and-depression). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. World Health Organization. Fact sheet: suicide. [Link](https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/suicide). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. National Institute of Mental Health. 2017. Men and mental health. [Link](https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/men-and-mental-health). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)