**The move to heart-healthy living and why this matters**

*Do we love our hearts enough? That’s the question framing this discussion by Vitality panellists. Here, our healthcare experts come together to unpack the devastating effects of cardiovascular disease – globally.*

“To really grasp the severity of this health issue”, begins Dr Jonathan Broomberg, CEO of Vitality Health International, “it’s worth pointing out that almost every 2 seconds, someone dies of cardiovascular disease, somewhere in the world[[1]](#footnote-1). This equates to just under 18 million people dying every year. And since we know that as much as 80% of these deaths are in fact preventable[[2]](#footnote-2), our role at Vitality is to do all we can to help prevent them.”

Globally, cardiovascular diseases (CVDs) are the number one cause of death with more people dying annually from them than anything else[[3]](#footnote-3). So, what are CVDs? “This is a broad term that describes multiple heart-related diseases and conditions that affect the heart and blood vessels,” says Dr Broomberg, “And the most common of these are coronary heart disease, stroke and heart failure.”

In addition to the human toll CVD takes in terms of lives and health, cardiovascular disease also causes considerable damage to global economies. “In America alone, Dr Broomberg continues, “estimates are that by 2035, the economic burden of cardiovascular disease will be in the trillions of dollars[[4]](#footnote-4).”

“Looking at this holistically, it makes medical, moral and financial sense for us as a global healthcare community to work together on the solutions to address this,” he adds.

**Step 1: bust cardiovascular-myths**

“There are many myths out there when it comes to CVDs,” cautions Dr Deepak Patel, Vitality South Africa Clinician. “I often hear patients say, *‘I’m too young to worry about heart disease’* or *‘I’d know if I had heart risks because there would be warning signs’* and both of these statements are misleading, even dangerous.”

Dr Patel points out that more and more young adults are now experiencing heart disease – likely linked to the rise in risk factors such as obesity and type 2 diabetes. “How you live now affects your longer-term risk for cardiovascular diseases,” adds Dr Patel. “Plaque can start accumulating in the arteries in early childhood and this is what leads to clogged arteries – so your heart health should always be top of mind, no matter your age.” Dr Patel suggests that this should also serve as a message to parents to foster healthy family habits early on, knowing that heathier children grow up to become healthier adults[[5]](#footnote-5).

Jonathan Dugas, PhD, Health Scientist and Vitality consultant, agrees, adding that with every additional risk factor comes an increased chance of developing heart disease. “Not all of these risk factors are in our control”, he adds. “Like your age, gender and family history.” But, says Dugas, many other risk are entirely modifiable, and the key to Vitality is that we help nudge people to work on these modifiable risks to live their healthiest lives.

“These are behaviours that are directly aligned to our Vitality programme pillars, and we help members prioritise these and then reward them for their progress in getting more active, eating healthier, managing stress and even sleeping better. If you can improve any or all of these, you will be on your way to better heart health.”

**Vitality: a proven prescription to treat CVDs**

Vitality is a science-based behaviour change programme that helps members keep track of their progress towards a healthier future and rewards them for making better choices with a premium range of health, lifestyle and leisure benefits[[6]](#footnote-6). As with all pillars of the programme, these benefits, or incentives, are offered to members to encourage them to make the necessary health changes, for the long term.

“At Vitality, we promote a heart-healthy lifestyle,” says Dr Seranne Motilal, Senior Health Insurance Specialist at Vitality Global. “This can be achieved through modifiable behaviours that we encourage our members to adopt to help lower CVD risk, and risk of other non-communicable diseases”.

“We all need to understand our own health and our own health risks,” she adds, “And through health screenings and assessments we’re far better equipped to get this knowledge, and act in ways to protect ourselves from heart-harm”.

As part of the programme, members get access to a Vitality Health Check (VHC)[[7]](#footnote-7) which is a simple set of essential health screenings including blood pressure, glucose, cholesterol or lipogram, weight assessment or body mass index, and a non-smoker’s declaration. There is also a Vitality Age (VA) assessment which evaluates aspects of wellness such as healthy eating, physical activity and stress management.

“To Dr Patel’s earlier point, many of the risk factors – such as high blood pressure or cholesterol – don’t always have obvious signs or symptoms so a crucial step in us being able to determine this disease risk is to have regular health check-ups,” Dr Motilal adds.

Christine Brophy, VP of Behaviour Change at Vitality Global attributes the pairing of the right incentive with these screenings as key to the programme’s success. “Attached to our behavioural change platform is the use of incentives to drive positive health decisions and so we incentivise health checks by allocating Vitality points – our version of a ‘health currency’. In addition, when results are in-range aligned to global benchmarks, members get boosted Vitality points which moves them up in programme tier, so they qualify for even better rewards”.

**Heart health starts in the kitchen**

“In fact,” says Vitality Nutritionist, Belinda Kahler, “Heart health starts in the grocery store even before we reach the kitchen. We advocate for heart-healthy diets which means making healthier food choices like more fruit and veg, whole grains, lean meats and less sugar, salt and saturated fat when you’re doing your grocery shopping[[8]](#footnote-8).”

To enable this, Vitality has a HealthyFood benefit which encourages members to buy healthy food at partner grocery stores linked to cost-saving discounts. Vitality members in certain markets are eligible for this benefit with an immediate rebate for healthy foods, which increases once a health review questionnaire has been completed. “It’s one of our most successful and certainly most popular member benefits,” adds Kahler.

The appeal with this type of nutrition nudge is that it makes healthier eating easy, accessible, and appealing from a cost perspective – with members seeing real value in making this positive behaviour change.

**The move to (more) movement**

From forks to fitness, the discussion turns to the role of physical activity when it comes to better heart health. With 1 in 4 adults not meeting the World Health Organization’s recommended levels for physical activity[[9]](#footnote-9), the panel agree that exercise interventions should be top of mind for all healthcare stakeholders.

Mari Leach, Biokineticist at Vitality South Africa, explains that 150 minutes per week of moderate-intensity exercise makes all the difference. “The health benefits of physical activity are well-documented and help to strengthen the heart muscle and keep our circulatory system functioning optimally. Exercise also helps our bodies to lower heart disease risk factors such as “bad” LDL cholesterol levels and high blood pressure, and increase “good” HDL cholesterol levels. In addition, exercise helps with weight management and helps us sleep better which also protects against heart disease[[10]](#footnote-10).”

“Different types of exercises are needed to provide complete fitness, and both aerobic exercise and resistance training are the most important for heart health[[11]](#footnote-11),” she adds. “We know that exercise is one of the best ways for you to improve your health overall, and the heart-health benefits are many – and these are all proven outcomes based on our research with Rand Europe[[12]](#footnote-12).”

The research that Leach is referring to is a leading behavioural change study published by *Rand Europe* which found that Vitality incentives, combined with the Apple Watch benefit, lead to significant and sustained increases in activity levels.

The study, with just under half a million participants, tested the effects of the Apple Watch with Vitality benefit on members’ long-term physical activity levels. It found that people with an Apple Watch linked to the Vitality programme are more likely to get active and reap the benefits of this physical activity.

“How does two years of extra life sound?” asks Leach, “Because that’s how much we estimate people gain because of this Vitality benefit when they meet their exercise goals. Within one year, members achieved significant health benefits like improving their cholesterol, blood pressure and cardiorespiratory fitness”.

**Digital healthcare – from wrists to hearts**

“Through our global partnerships with brands like Apple and Samsung, we’ve been able to encourage the use of fitness devices which don’t just track physical activity, but are also moving into the medical arena,” says Lee Corrigan, Head of Product Development for Vitality Global. “This is shaping a new era of wearable health where devices will play a role in healthcare delivery, diagnostics, and even therapeutics. This is going to be hugely beneficial in the CVD space where devices like an Apple Watch become 24/7 health screeners on our wrists – to monitor, diagnose, and treat various health problems”.

Corrigan recalls the story of a Vitality member who attributes the Vitality Apple Watch benefit to having saved his life[[13]](#footnote-13). “The member was suffering from a condition known as atrial fibrillation that can lead to poor blood flow, clots, stroke, and heart failure. Because he was vigilant with measuring his heart rate in real time on his Apple Watch, he picked it up in time and got to a cardiologist for urgent treatment. This is one of many examples of how technology is helping to diagnose and treat diseases like heart disease.”

Corrigan suggests there is much more to come, based on new insights from research this year on how AI can flag heart disease[[14]](#footnote-14). Here, an AI tool was trained to collect and collate clinical data like age, gender, weight, heart rate, and blood pressure, and at the same time interpret images of what healthy heart processes looked like. The deep-learning tool could then make cardiac health predictions – at impressively accurate levels.

“This is all moving us in the right direction to being able to offer patients increasingly personalised and fast-paced healthcare, and it will be exciting to follow this AI progress”.

**Lastly, let’s talk stress**

The panel conclude with a discussion on stress and how this can contribute to health risks over time.

“In simple terms,” says Dr Mosima Mabunda, Head of Wellness for Vitality South Africa, “When we get stressed, a hormone called cortisol is released and high levels of this, repeatedly and over a long period of time, start to wreak havoc with our blood cholesterol, triglycerides, blood sugar, and blood pressure which are those common risk factors for heart disease[[15]](#footnote-15)”.

“It’s also about how we then deal with our stress,” Dr Mabunda adds. “Some of these coping mechanisms, like excess consumption of alcohol, over-eating or smoking, are not healthy ways of dealing with stress and end up compounding the damage being done to the heart!”

As part of Vitality’s ongoing commitment to prioritise mental health, the programme offers tools and resources that highlight stress management, mindfulness and meditation, restorative sleep, financial wellbeing and dealing with issues related to work/life balance and burnout. “We need to manage our stress better as a global population,” concludes Dr Mabunda, “This is key to healthier hearts”.

The panel ends with the opening question: *Do we love our hearts enough?* Withheart disease and other CVDs placing an enormous burden on the world – for us as individuals, our communities, as well as broader healthcare providers and systems, the answer is that we have much more to do before answering this positively.

*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.*

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