



Supporting a Healthy Heart in Pharmacy

Written by Gillian Hogan, Irish Heart Foundation



Irish Heart Foundation

“As the public often run to them in times of emergencies, pharmacies are optimal locations to keep AEDs”

The sudden collapse of Danish footballer Christian Eriksen due to a cardiac arrest during the first half of Denmark’s opening Euro 2020 match against Finland shocked viewers around the world.

The quick action of Eriksen’s team mates and officials to save his life has highlighted the need for bystanders to react with speed to a cardiac arrest.

When somebody suffers a cardiac arrest, without CPR or a defibrillator (AED) their chances of survival decrease by 10% every minute.

Because of the quick actions by those around him, Christian Eriksen thankfully survived.

Eriksen was also fortunate that the event happened in such a public place with people on hand to immediately begin CPR and use an AED. However, we know that 70% of cardiac arrests happen in the home, so it is vital that people understand what to do in that situation.

What is an AED?

An AED is an Automated External Defibrillator. It is a portable, simple to use, computerised device. When someone suffers a sudden cardiac arrest, it checks the heart’s rhythm and automatically recognises if there is a life-threatening rhythm. Once detected the AED then delivers a shock to stun the heart and help it return to its normal rhythm.

As the public often run to them in times of emergencies, pharmacies are optimal locations to keep AEDs. There are a number of things to keep in mind before buying an AED including accessibility, durability, how easy it is to use, the cost, shelf life and whether or not warranty or backup is provided by the manufacturer. It is important that the AED is located in a central location, that bystanders are aware of its location, that it is accessible at all times and easy to access. AEDs should be regularly checked to ensure they work and the battery and pads are within date.

After being treated on the pitch with CPR and a defibrillator, Eriksen regained consciousness and was hospitalised. He has since been fitted with an ICD.

What is an ICD?

An ICD or Implantable Cardioverter Defibrillator is a battery-powered device that is placed inside your chest cavity under your skin near your shoulder. It continuously monitors your heart rhythm. It can either act as a pacemaker detecting when the heartbeat is too slow and sends tiny electrical signals to your heart, or if your heart beat it too fast or chaotic, it emits shocks to bring the heart back into normal rhythm. People generally have ICDs implanted because their heart has been damaged by a heart attack or because they have a heart condition, often inherited, that puts them at risk of developing arrhythmias.

Prevention

Heart disease and stroke is still one of the leading causes of death in Ireland. A total of 8,744 lives were lost to heart disease and stroke last year, according to the latest figures from the Central Statistics Office.

The good news is that 80 per cent of death and disability from heart disease and stroke is preventable.

One of the best ways to prevent the risk of developing cardiovascular disease is to maintain a healthy lifestyle.

There are a number of modifiable risk factors that can influence and increase this risk and these include high cholesterol, high blood pressure, overweight, physical activity and smoking.

Cholesterol

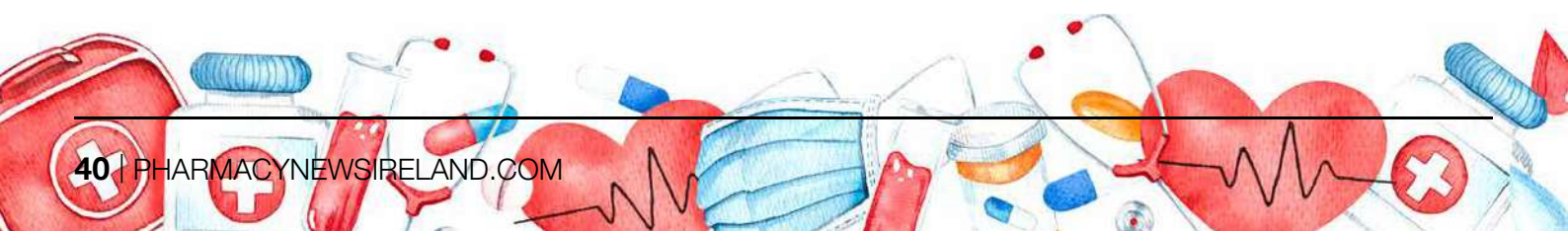
Cholesterol is a type of fat in our blood which is produced by the liver. Everyone has cholesterol and some of it comes from the food that we eat. Our bodies need a certain amount of cholesterol for normal cell function, to help digestion and produce certain hormones.

Not all cholesterol is bad. If your total cholesterol is high, it can mean that you have a lot of LDL (bad) cholesterol in your blood. Too much LDL cholesterol can be harmful because it sticks to the inside walls of your arteries. This can lead to fatty material building up – in a process called atherosclerosis. It makes it harder for blood to flow through, which can lead to a stroke or heart attack.

High cholesterol affects people of all ages. High cholesterol can be inherited but is also caused by lifestyle. People with high cholesterol often have no noticeable symptoms. The only way to know if you have high cholesterol is to go to your doctor and have a blood test. Your cholesterol can become raised for a number of reasons, including a strong family history, low physical activity, a diet high in saturated fat, smoking and having overweight or obesity.

There are treatments available to patients with high cholesterol if needed. For example, medication may be prescribed to keep levels of LDL cholesterol under control.

Making small changes now can make a big difference to patients’ lives now and in the future.





Blood Pressure

Over half of all adults in Ireland over 45 years of age have high blood pressure (or hypertension). The risk factors associated with high blood pressure can be avoided if your blood pressure is controlled. However, about four in every five men and two-thirds of women with high blood pressure are not being treated.

High blood pressure usually has no symptoms. The only way to find out if you have high blood pressure is to have it measured. The normal level of blood pressure is usually about 120 (systolic) over 80 (diastolic). If your blood pressure is 140 over 90 or higher (or 140 over 80 if you have diabetes) you should discuss this reading with your doctor.

The only way to look after and to know if you have high blood pressure is to have it measured. It is recommended that people aged over 30 have their blood pressure checked every year. If your blood pressure is borderline high (around 140 over 90), you'll need to get it checked more often by a doctor or nurse.

Pharmacists are very well placed to detect high blood pressure and many pharmacies offer blood pressure checks with some doing 24-hour blood pressure monitoring.

A 2018 study by the Irish Pharmacy Union revealed that one in four people who had their blood pressure checked at their local pharmacy as part of a new study were identified as having high blood pressure.

According to the findings of the pilot study which aimed to detect people at risk of hypertension and atrial fibrillation in the community, 5.5% were found to have an irregular pulse and two per cent showed signs of both.

Furthermore 26% were referred to their GP because of their check and four per cent of those were started on medication.

Physical activity and smoking cessation

Getting regular physical activity is one of the best things you can do to improve your overall health. It is recommended that adults should be active at a moderate intensity, for at least 30 minutes a day, five days a week.

Smoking is a major risk factor for cardiovascular disease, including heart attack and stroke. One in every two smokers will die of a tobacco-related disease.

Once you stop smoking, your mental and physical health improves immediately. After one year, your risk of having a heart attack is cut to half that of a smoker.

Pharmacists around the country are also very well placed to support people to stop smoking by offer smoking cessation services and supports.

Supports and Services

At the Irish Heart Foundation, we have supported people living with cardiovascular disease for more than 50 years and we have developed a range of new services to support people living with cardiovascular disease through the Covid-19 pandemic and beyond.

We run 31 support groups around the country which prior to the outbreak of Covid-19 met regularly in person. Since the pandemic, this network has transitioned to online and telephone support, making them even more accessible.

The Heart Support Network, Life After Stroke and The Irish Heart Foundation's Carers' group are all private Facebook groups we run by to give patients access to expert information and allow them to share thoughts and concerns with similarly affected people. All groups include home-based exercise videos, advice from nurses, tips on diet and peer-to-peer support which is vital at this time. New members are always welcome in all groups and are easy to join. Please email Tracy on tegan@irishheart.ie or call 01 6685001.

Heart Failure supports

Approximately 90,000 people in Ireland are living with heart failure, many of whom were cocooning during the pandemic. We established a suite of new support services for people with heart failure to help keep them well and alleviate their sense of isolation and loneliness.

The supports, which include a podcast series, nurse support line, private

Facebook support page, online meetings, daily online exercise classes and peer-to-peer support are all designed to help patients and their families to keep both physically and mentally well while staying at home.

People can sign up to receive the supports on irishheart.ie or for queries please phone 01 668 5001 or email heartfailure@irishheart.ie.

Stroke Support

It's estimated that around 7,500 people are hospitalised after a stroke in Ireland each year – the equivalent of 21 strokes a day nationwide – and the majority of people will be discharged home after spending an average of around two weeks in hospital.

Returning home after stroke is difficult at any time, but never more so than during the Covid-19 pandemic. So, stroke patients being discharged from hospital needed extensive extra support.

To meet this need, in conjunction with the HSE National Stroke Programme, we launched a new telephone support service for stroke patients post-discharge. There are also a number of stroke patients who may need ongoing support in their recovery irrespective of whether they are newly discharged or not. Therefore, the service is open to anyone post-stroke regardless of where they are in their recovery journey.

The phone service involves trained and experienced Irish Heart Foundation staff and volunteers making regular calls to stroke survivors who have been referred by acute hospital stroke teams to check on their health and wellbeing.

The service provides any information or advice patients require, answers their questions about recovery from stroke, and helps ensure they have everything they need to keep safe.

For more information on the stroke support service please call 01 6685001 or email support@irishheart.ie Monday to Friday 9 am to 1 pm.

The Irish Heart Foundation also offers a free nurse support line with trained nurses available on phone and email support Monday to Friday 9 am to 1 pm. Anyone living with heart disease and stroke who has concerns or questions can contact the nurse support line on 01 668 5001 or support@irishheart.ie.

For more information on heart health or ways to get support please see www.irishheart.ie

