

## Heart health: movement and motivation

Many of us know that being physically active is one of the best ways to reduce our risk of heart disease. But how do you stay motivated and make physical activity a regular, and enjoyable, part of your life?

Cardiovascular disease – diseases of the heart and blood vessels, such as heart attack and stroke – is the number-one killer of women in Australia, making it a major women's health concern.

Tina McCarthy, founder of the cycling group [Wheel Women](#) and a proud Women's Health Week ambassador, knows all about the importance of physical activity and cardiovascular health, having a family history of heart disease and a heart condition herself.

Below, she tells us her story about how she has made physical activity a regular part of her life and how she stays motivated. But before we get onto Tina's story, let's cover the basics of moving more and how it relates to cardiovascular health.

### Let's get physical

Physical activity strengthens the heart muscle, which improves its ability to pump blood to the lungs and throughout the body.

The best types of physical activity for heart health are the ones that increase your heart rate, make you feel warm and get you a little out of breath. This is what's known as moderate-intensity exercise. It includes activities such as brisk walking, cycling or playing tennis.

According to the Heart Foundation, 150 minutes of this kind of exercise each week – about 20 minutes per day – plus muscle-strengthening activities on at least two days each week can reduce your risk of heart disease by 35%.

Physical activity helps to ward off the risk factors that are linked with heart disease, such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol and being overweight. If you already have heart disease, physical activity can help you to manage the condition.

Other ways to reduce your risk of heart disease include:

- getting regular heart health checks
- eating a healthy diet, such as the [Mediterranean diet](#)
- not smoking
- drinking alcohol only in moderation, or not at all.

Now let's get back to Tina and what keeps her fit and healthy.

## Tina's wake-up call

Through her fun and supportive Melbourne cycling group, Wheel Women, Tina has made it her mission to encourage women of all ages and levels of fitness to hop on a bike. That's why, in 2017, we invited her to become a Jean Hailes Women's Health Week ambassador.

The inspiring Tina has since also become an ambassador for VicHealth's 'This Girl Can' campaign, encouraging and empowering women of all ages, shapes and abilities to be active without worrying about judgement, gender stereotypes or skill level.

But Tina hasn't always been into cycling, and hasn't always been as fit and healthy as she is today.

In the past, Tina had been a running coach, and exercise was an important part of her life. However, after becoming a mother, a loss of physical fitness crept up on her.

"I don't know what happened," she explains. "I guess, like a lot of us with kids, you eat those snack foods like chocolate in the afternoon when you're exhausted. And it's easier to sit around and do nothing when you're so damn tired."

Seven years ago, a single event opened her eyes.

"It came about from this real epiphany moment when I was out riding with my son and my husband on one of my son's training rides for his school," she says.

"And I wondered why all these kids were going past me, and why are they are going so fast?"

"But I realised that they weren't going fast – I was going really slow.

"I'd become really unfit and I'd put on a lot of weight because I'd been sitting around doing nothing, and it was just this moment where I said to myself, 'I've got to do something'."

Tina says she doesn't know why that particular moment clicked for her, "because I'd probably had a lot of other opportunities." But since then, cycling has transformed her life and her health.

"I got into a habit of that and I wasn't really doing anything for myself," she says. "So, it was a really nice wake-up call. I started cycling and it really changed my life completely."

## What keeps Tina moving?

Tina says one of the most important things that helps her stay motivated is that she never views cycling as 'exercise'.

"It's all about, 'how is this going to make me feel?'," she says

“And when I get on a bike, I feel like a kid! There is nothing more fun than tearing around the neighbourhood, doing bunny hops and skids – not where there’s too many people around!”

“But it’s great fun and I love it.”

Tina says that exercising with friends, and keeping that commitment to each other, is key to her motivation. Her cycling buddies help her to stay the course, and it’s the fun she has with them that keeps her coming back for more.

“That’s why [Wheel Women] started,” she says. “[When we’re out cycling] we don’t talk about exercise and we don’t talk about losing weight. We just talk about fun stuff, girl stuff ... we talk about bikes mostly!”

“And so that helps me stay motivated too, that social interaction I get from it.”

### Coming into focus

Last year Tina was diagnosed with a heart condition. It came as a shock; she was fit and healthy, but a strong family history of heart disease had come into play.

On her blog, Tina describes feeling shattered and let down – it took her some time and a few good (but cautious) bike rides to think things through and be able to focus on the advice of her cardiologist and GP: “Keep riding, don’t stop, keep doing everything I was already doing”, she was told.

Tina says there are so many ‘what-ifs’ when she thinks back on her story. “What if I never picked up that bike [all those years ago] ... would I be here now to tell you my story? Might I be the statistic?”

“I probably don’t really want to dwell on the answer to that question, and certainly my family doesn’t. It’s been a scare for us all.”

“What I do want to focus on is the importance of listening to my body, making time for me, asking the right questions I need answers to, and staying active...because all of those things are ultimately what has put me in a great position.”

### Not about the numbers

For Tina, physical activity is not about weight loss or reaching targets.

“I never look at the numbers – I never think about ‘how much do I weigh’, or ‘how far have I been’ or ‘have I done my half hour today’?,” she says.

“I go because I love it.”

Tina says that putting the focus back on her own health, rather than worrying about everyone else's, plays a big part in her life.

When the opportunity to go for a ride presents itself, she takes it – putting herself and her health first.

"I just do it because I've got some time," she says. "[I say to myself] 'wow, it's beautiful and sunny out there – I'm going! See you later everyone ... this is my time!'"

***This interview with Tina formed part of a video for Jean Hailes' Women's Health Week 2019. [Watch the video in full](#) and hear more tips on moving more and staying motivated from Triple J's Bridget Hustwaite and GoRun coach Kylie Royal Meehan.***

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[jeanhailes.org.au](http://jeanhailes.org.au) 1800 JEAN HAILES (532 642)