

People who know their 'heart age' make greater improvements to their heart health

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New research, published today in the *European Journal of Preventive Cardiology*, suggests that talking to patients about their heart health using the "Heart Age" concept, a simple way of estimating and expressing cardiovascular risk, promotes behavioral changes that result in a reduction in their CVD risk, leading to improved health outcomes.

Risk scores for diseases such as CVD are usually presented as the percent chance of contracting the disease within the next ten years. The Heart Age Calculator, <http://www.heartage.me>, uses the same well established risk factor data, but expresses an individual's risk score as their estimated Heart Age to make it more personally relevant to the individual.

Cardiovascular disease (CVD) is the world's biggest killer(3), but doctors have long struggled to explain risk factors to patients in a way that encourages them to change their behaviour thus reducing risk. Previous research has shown that Heart Age is more likely to be understood and motivate people to make positive changes than traditional % risk scores, especially those who are at higher levels of modifiable risk(4).

Now, for the first time, researchers have shown that using the Heart Age tool to raise awareness of CVD risk promotes behavioural changes that result in a decrease in CVD risk. Researchers at the University of the Balearic Islands, Spain carried out the study amongst 3,153 patients, who were randomly assigned to one of three groups before completing an annual health assessment. One group was then presented with their CVD

risk expressed as a % risk, while another received the same information expressed as their estimated Heart Age. A third control group received general guidance on healthy living only. Follow up measurements were recorded a year later during the subsequent annual health assessment.

Dr Pedro Tauler, researcher belonging to the Research Group on Evidence, Lifestyles and Health from the University of the Balearic Islands, commented "We know that traditional risks scores can be confusing. We wanted to test whether using the Heart Age Calculator to talk to patients about their CVD risk would have an effect on motivating them to adopt healthier lifestyles and, in turn, reduce their risk of developing CVD."

The results showed that patients who had been told their CVD risk (both as a percentage or Heart Age) demonstrated significant decreases in their risk scores compared to the control group, with improvements being greatest in the Heart Age group. Furthermore, patients who were told their Heart Age were far more likely to take action to live healthier lifestyles, such as quitting smoking. Quitting rate for smokers was four times greater in the Heart Age group compared to those who received the traditional percentage risk scores.

The authors highlight that the significant improvement in CVD risk seen in this study in the Heart Age group was reached with no intervention other than informing participants of their Heart Age.

Dr Pedro Tauler said: "This would suggest that the mere fact of presenting the patients with information that is easy to understand has a positive effect in engaging them to take preventive action. Heart Age is a cost- and time-effective strategy to motivate [patients](#) to adopt a healthier lifestyle that results in a reduction in their CVD risk. The simplicity of the tool and the fact that it is easy to understand are core to its effectiveness."

More information: References

1 "Effectiveness of the Heart Age tool for improving modifiable cardiovascular risk factors in a Southern European population: a randomized trial," by Angel A Lopez-Gonzalez, Antoni Aguilo, Margalida Frontera, Miquel Bennasar-Veny, Irene Campos, Teofila Vicente-Herrero, Matias Tomas-Salva, Joan De Pedro-Gomez and Pedro Tauler ([DOI: 10.1177/2047487313518479](https://doi.org/10.1177/2047487313518479)) and appears in the European Journal of Preventive Cardiology.

2 www.heartage.me

3 World Health Organization. (2011) Global status report on noncommunicable diseases 2010. Geneva, Available at www.who.int

4 Anastasia Soureti, Robert Hurling, Peter Murray, Willem van Mechelen and Mark Cobain. (2010) Evaluation of a cardiovascular disease risk assessment tool for the promotion of healthier lifestyles. *European Journal of Cardiovascular Prevention and Rehabilitation* 17(5):519-23

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