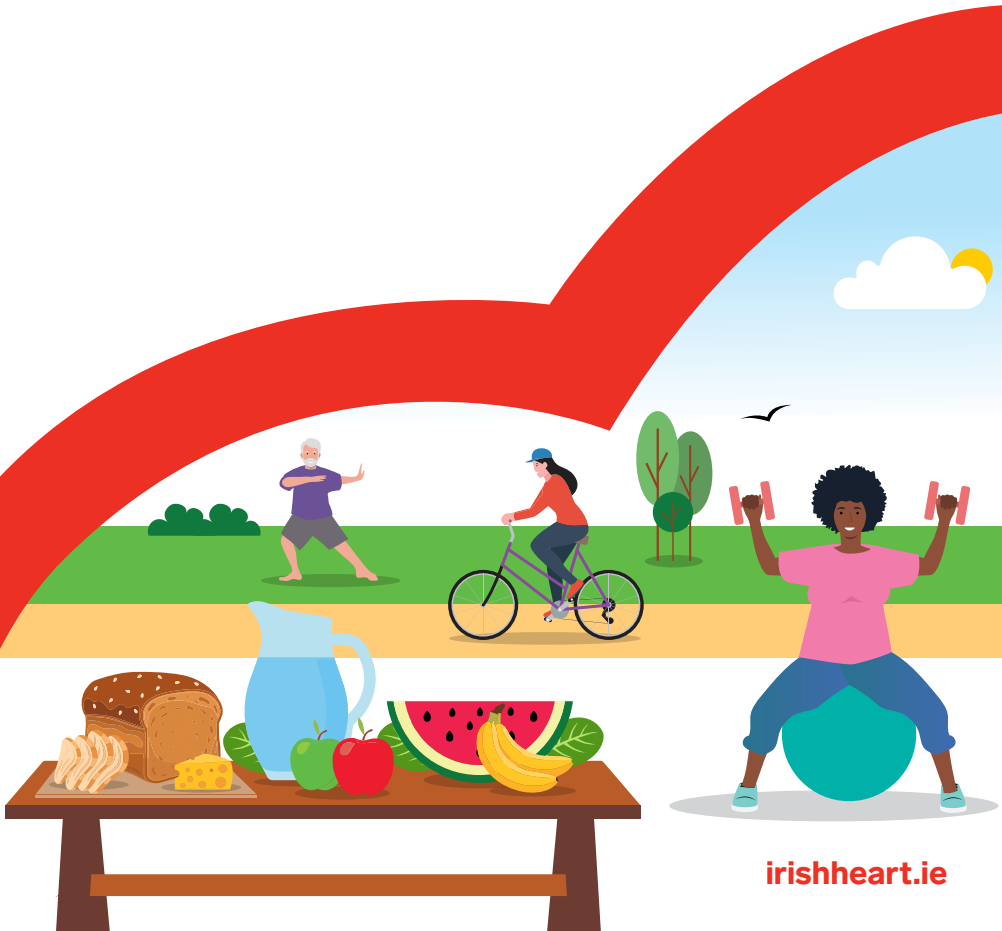
Irish Heart Foundation

The National Stroke & Heart Charity

My heart health

A helpful guide to taking care of your heart



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My heart health

A helpful guide to taking care of your heart

Produced by the Irish Heart Foundation | 2025

This booklet is for anyone who wants to learn about how to look after their heart health. You may have been diagnosed with a risk factor for heart disease or stroke, like high blood pressure or cholesterol.

You may be a stroke survivor or may have a heart condition. Or maybe you just want to make some healthy changes.

This booklet is a starting point. It will help you understand:

1. why it is important to look after your heart
2. how you can look after your heart

For more information or to donate, visit **irishheart.ie.**

Acknowledgements

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- Ballinfoile Castlegar Neighbourhood Centre
- Westside Resource Centre
- Salthill Men's Shed

We thank them for being so generous with their time, feedback and insights, all of which shaped the development of this booklet.

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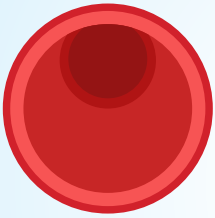
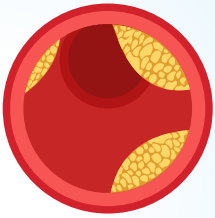
Why is it important to look after my heart?

Your heart is **a muscle that pumps blood full of oxygen** to all parts of your body, including your brain. Your blood flows through blood vessels called arteries and veins. Over time, a fatty material called plaque can build up in your arteries.



Healthy artery



Blocked artery

This can cause:

- heart attacks
- strokes
- other heart conditions

Cardiovascular disease (heart disease and stroke) is one of the **leading causes of death in Ireland**.

80% of premature heart disease and stroke can be **prevented by lifestyle changes** alone.

What increases my risk of heart disease and stroke?

Risk factors increase your risk of heart disease and stroke, especially if you have a pre-existing heart condition or if you have had a stroke.

While some of our health is linked to where we grew up, the world around us and our access to clean air, green spaces, education and healthcare, it is also linked to our age, family history and ethnic background.

While you cannot change these things, there are steps you can take to lower your risk factors and to support and maintain good health.

A risk factor is anything that increases the chance of something bad happening to your health.

You are **more likely** to have heart disease or stroke early if you have a risk factor.

Most risk factors can be **prevented** and **managed**.

Risk factors I can manage with lifestyle changes

High blood pressure

High blood pressure happens when your heart has to work harder to pump blood around your body. Over time, it can increase your risk of heart failure, heart attack or stroke.

High LDL cholesterol

Low-density lipoprotein (LDL) is our 'bad' cholesterol. High LDL cholesterol levels can cause fatty plaques to build up in your arteries.

Type 2 diabetes

Type 2 diabetes can damage your arteries and doubles your risk of heart disease.

Unhealthy eating habits

Too many foods high in fat, sugar or salt can raise your blood pressure, cholesterol and blood sugar. For example, burgers, sweets and crisps.

Physical inactivity

Not moving enough can cause high blood pressure, high cholesterol and type 2 diabetes.

Smoking or vaping

The chemicals in cigarettes and other smoking products (like e-cigarettes and nicotine pouches) can damage your arteries.

Alcohol

Alcohol can increase your risk of heart disease and stroke.

Chronic stress

Feeling too much stress can make it harder to look after your heart health and can lead to habits like smoking, drinking alcohol or craving foods that are higher in fat, sugar or salt.

Excess weight

Living with excess weight means carrying more fat around your organs and your middle. This can cause you to have high blood pressure, high cholesterol and type 2 diabetes.

These are the risk factors of heart disease and stroke.

Do you have any risk factors in your own life that you would like to work on?

In the next section we will talk about **the steps you can take to reduce your risk**.

How can I look after my heart?

There are **lots** of things you can do to look after your heart:

- Eat for a healthy heart
- Aim for your best weight
- Move more
- Quit smoking and vaping
- Drink less alcohol
- Know your numbers
- Manage stress
- Take any prescribed medication

By taking these heart-healthy steps, you can **reduce your risk** of **heart disease and stroke**.

Eat for a healthy heart

Eating well is one of the **best things** you can do for your heart.

What does a heart-healthy diet look like?

A heart-healthy diet includes:

Fruit and veg:
5-7 servings daily, (2-3 at each meal). Fresh, frozen, dried or tinned in water/juice all count.

Wholegrains and high-fibre starchy carbs:
3-5 servings daily, for example, oats, brown rice, wholegrain bread/pasta and breakfast cereals or potatoes with skins.

Milk, yoghurt and cheese:
3 servings daily, for example, 200ml glass milk, 125g pot yoghurt, 2 thumbs of cheese.

Beans, peas, lentils and soya:
Ideally, have a serving every second day. Typical portions: 150g beans/lentils (½-⅔ tin drained), 200ml soya drink, 100g tofu.

Nuts and seeds:
30g handful (unsalted, unsweetened) daily.

Fish and seafood:
Have a serving 1-2 times a week. For oily fish (like salmon, mackerel or trout), enjoy twice a week. Fresh, frozen or tinned fish and seafood all count.

Eggs:
No need to limit unless advised by your dietitian or doctor.

Poultry and lean meats:
Choose skinless poultry, lean cuts or plant proteins more often. Limit red meat to 3 times or less per week and minimise processed meats (like sausages, ham, bacon).

Healthy fats:
Small amounts daily from olive or rapeseed oil, avocados, nuts and seeds.

Herbs and spices:
Use instead of salt for flavour.

Fluids:
Stay hydrated with lots of fluid (water, milk, tea or coffee). If you have a medical condition like heart failure, speak to your doctor about how much fluid you can have.

How many servings you need depends on your age, activity level and health.

What is a portion?

You can use your hands to work out portion sizes. In general:

1 fist = 1 serving of fruit, veg or carbohydrates

1 palm = 1 portion of meat or fish

2 thumbs = 1 portion of cheese

The tip of your thumb = 1 portion of fats or oils

How should I fill my plate?

A **balanced plate** is made up of:

½ plate: vegetables, salad or fruit

¼ plate protein (fish, beans, meat, eggs)

¼ plate wholegrains or starchy carbohydrates

Eat less often

Salt:

Aim for less than 1 teaspoon (or 6 grams) a day. Most comes from packaged foods.

Foods high in sugar, salt, or unhealthy fats:

Crisps, biscuits, sweets, processed meats. Limit to now and then (maximum twice a week).

Cholesterol-lowering foods

Some foods, such as oats, nuts, beans, soya products and foods with added plant extracts called sterols/stanols can help lower cholesterol. For information and practical tips visit irishheart.ie

Money-saving tips:

Healthy food can be more expensive, but there are ways to save:

- plan your meals and use a shopping list
- choose supermarket own-brands
- stock up on oats, frozen veg, beans and tinned oily fish
- buy fruit and veg in season
- batch cook and freeze extras
- mix meat with beans, lentils or vegetables to stretch it further
- try a few meat-free meals each week
- grow your own herbs for fresh flavour

Aim for your best weight

Your 'best weight' is the weight you reach when you're living the healthiest life you can truly **enjoy and sustain long term**. This lowers your risk of high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke and diabetes.

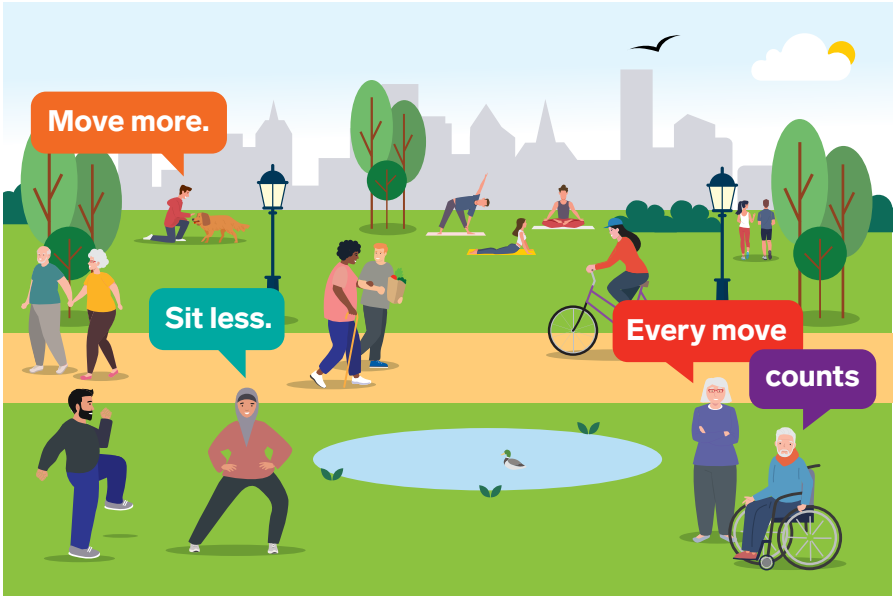
Tips to support your best weight:

- Build sustainable habits. Quick fixes don't work. Focus on small, consistent changes.
- Move more.
- Prioritise sleep – make sure you get 7-9 hours every night.
- Plan meals, shop with a list and eat at regular times.
- Manage your stress.
- Notice your progress beyond the scales – do you have more energy? Do you feel better? Has your sleep improved?
- Listen to your body. Notice hunger and fullness signs.
- If your weight is affecting your health, talk to your doctor or dietitian and ask for help.

For more support, visit irishheart.ie

Move more

Staying active can help you to keep your heart healthy and lowers your risk of heart disease and stroke.



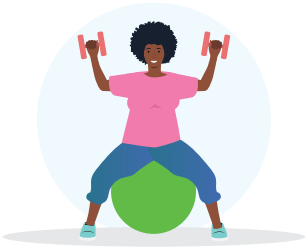
Staying active also helps to:

- lower and maintain your blood pressure and cholesterol levels
- maintain your best weight
- improve your energy
- lift your mood
- lower stress
- improve sleep

Taking part in **classes, walking groups** or **sports** are great ways to meet people and make new friends.

How much physical activity do I need?

You need **at least 150 minutes a week of moderate intensity activity**. You don't have to do it all in one go. You could aim to do 30 minutes, 5 days a week.



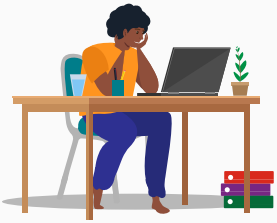
Do **muscle-strengthening exercises 2 days a week** (like lifting weights, yoga or Pilates, or even lifting shopping bags).

If you're 65 and older, try to include **balance exercises** (like Tai Chi or standing on one leg).

Moderate intensity activities are those that make you **breathe harder, feel warmer** and your **heart beat faster.**

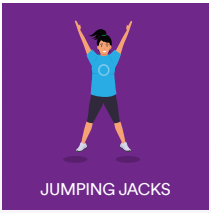
You don't need to spend hours at the gym.

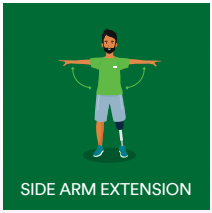
Activities like walking, gardening, housework and playing with your kids or grandkids all count.

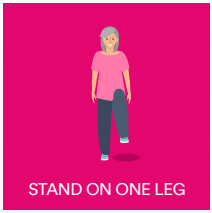


Sitting too much, even if you are physically active, can also raise your risk of heart disease or stroke. Try breaking up long periods of sitting with light activity.

Try our **Escape Your Chair** challenge or do some desk exercises to get moving at work.







For more support, visit irishheart.ie

Get moving safely

If you have been diagnosed with a heart condition or have had a stroke, it is important to talk to your doctor before you begin. Your doctor can give you advice on how to get moving safely and how often you should be active.

Tips to add more movement into your life

Make active choices

Take the stairs instead of the lift. Walk instead of drive when you can. Choose to walk the longer route to get some extra steps. Walk your children to school if possible. Get off public transport a stop early and walk the rest of the way.

Get outside

Being active in nature has mental health benefits.

Make movement fun and social

Join a new class, team or group, or get active with friends, family or workmates.

Do what you enjoy and mix it up

Choose activities you love doing and try new ones to keep things interesting.

Plan ahead

Add activity times into your weekly schedule. If it is a planned event, you are more likely to stick to it.

Quit smoking and vaping

Stopping smoking and vaping is the **single most important thing** you can do to improve your heart health and extend your life.

If you smoke, you are:

2-4 times
more likely to develop heart disease or have a stroke

2 times more
likely to have a heart attack compared to non-smokers

Passive smoking (when you breathe in other people's smoke) is also harmful, especially for children and older people, and can cause heart disease, stroke, different types of cancer, asthma and more.

Quitting smoking **improves your health** immediately.

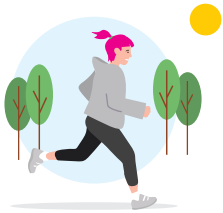
After 20 minutes...

Your **blood pressure** and **pulse** return to normal.

3 days...

Breathing gets easier and your **energy levels** rise.

3 months...



Your **lung capacity** increases by 30%.

1 year...

Your **risk** of having a heart attack is **cut in half**.

15 years...

Your risk of heart attack and stroke is the same as **someone who has never smoked**.

As well as the above benefits, you will also have peace of mind knowing that you are protecting your health and the health of your family and friends.

Need help quitting smoking or vaping?

Call the National Smokers' Quitline on **1800 201 203** (free) or freetext **QUIT** to **50100**.

Drink less alcohol

You may have heard that small amounts of alcohol, like red wine, are good for your heart. This is a myth. Drinking even a small amount can raise your risk of serious health conditions like cancer, liver disease, diabetes, heart attack and stroke.

To protect your heart, drink as little alcohol as possible or none at all.

Every step you take to cut back lowers your risk.

If you do decide to drink alcohol, the HSE recommends you:

17 11

Have **no more than 17** standard drinks a week for men or 11 standard drinks for women

Avoid drinking **more than 6** standard drinks on any one occasion (binge drinking)

M T W T F S S

Spread your drinks out over the week

Have at least **3 alcohol-free days** each week

What is a standard drink?

In Ireland, 1 standard drink contains 10 grams of pure alcohol, which is roughly the same as:

½ pint beer or cider

100ml (small glass) of wine

35ml pub measure of spirits

Tips to cut back

1. Alternate with water or non-alcoholic drinks.
2. Choose smaller or lower-strength servings.
3. Avoid rounds and measure your drinks.
4. Keep alcohol out of the house.
5. Plan for social or stressful occasions.

For more information and support, visit www.askaboutalcohol.ie

Know your numbers

Knowing your key health numbers (blood pressure, cholesterol, pulse rate and blood sugar) helps you keep track of your heart health. Get regular health checks so you can keep track of your numbers.

This will help you:

- spot changes early and know if you need to take action
- see the benefits when you make heart-healthy lifestyle changes

You can get heart health checks done by a doctor or nurse – some local pharmacies also do them.

Blood pressure

- Blood pressure is the force of blood pushing against the walls of your arteries. If your blood pressure is high, you are at risk of heart failure, heart attack and stroke.

Pulse (heart rate)

- Your pulse shows how fast or slow your heart is beating.
- A regular, steady pulse is a sign of good heart health.

Cholesterol

- Too much low-density lipoprotein (LDL) or 'bad' cholesterol can block blood flow in your arteries and raise your risk of heart attack or stroke.
- The goal is to keep LDL as low as possible for as long as possible.
- Prescribed medication can help if you need it.

Blood sugar

- High blood sugar increases your risk of developing type 2 diabetes and heart disease.
- Ask your doctor what your target level should be.

To learn more about blood pressure and cholesterol, see irishheart.ie

Manage your stress

Stress is a normal part of life but when stress builds up, it can affect your mood, sleep and overall health. Ongoing stress can also lead to habits like smoking, drinking alcohol or craving foods that are higher in fat, sugar or salt, which can raise your risk of heart disease.

Stress busters you can try:

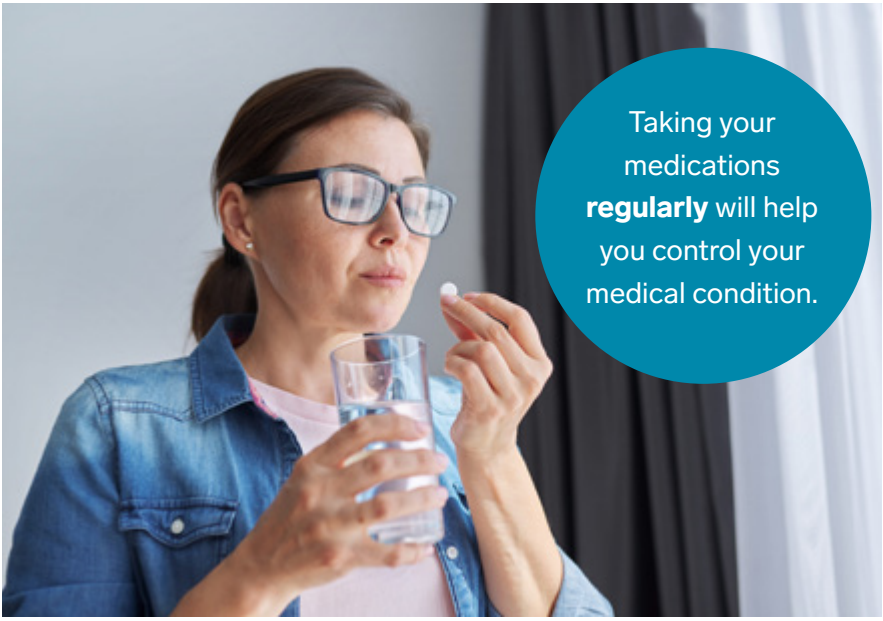
	Move more. Get out in the fresh air. Being physically active in green spaces is good for your mental health.
	Choose **physical activities you enjoy** like walking, gardening or running.
	Keep regular **sleep** routines.
	Find ways to relax: Read a book, listen to music, start a hobby or try meditation.
	Spend time with **friends, family and pets.**
	Try to **reduce your screen time**.

If you feel anxious, sad or overwhelmed, and it's affecting your daily life, talk to your doctor. Reaching out is a strength. Many people feel better after telling someone how they feel. Support is available – you don't have to manage things alone.

Visit yourmentalhealth.ie for further advice and support.

Take your medication

If you have been diagnosed with a **heart condition**, or you have **high blood pressure**, **high cholesterol** or **type 2 diabetes**, make sure to take your medication as prescribed by your doctor.



It is important to let your **doctor** or **pharmacist** know if you are taking any other medication or supplements.

You can keep track of your medications using the medication tracker on Page 25.

My medication tracker

Use the below medication tracker template to help you keep track of your prescribed medications.

Name of medication	
What is it for?	
Dosage	
Frequency	
Prescribed by?	

Name of medication	
What is it for?	
Dosage	
Frequency	
Prescribed by?	

Take the Happy Heart Quiz

Now you understand the steps to look after your heart health.

Take this quiz to discover how your habits support your heart, and where small changes could make a big difference.

Tick **'Usually'** or **'Rarely'** for each question below. Then read your result for simple next steps.

Do you...	Usually	Rarely
Eat 5-7 portions of fruit and veg a day?	☐	☐
Choose wholegrains over white carbohydrates?	☐	☐
Keep processed meat to a minimum?	☐	☐
Include plant proteins like beans or lentils most days?	☐	☐
Eat fish twice a week (including oily fish)?	☐	☐
Have 3 servings of milk, yogurt or cheese daily?	☐	☐
Use small amounts of healthy oils/spreads (like olive or rapeseed)?	☐	☐
Choose healthy drinks/snacks (like water, fruit, nuts)?	☐	☐
Cook from scratch and limit salty processed foods?	☐	☐
Feel in control of how much and when you eat?	☐	☐
Feel close to your healthiest sustainable weight?	☐	☐
Stay within alcohol limits or avoid alcohol?	☐	☐
Avoid smoking and vaping completely?	☐	☐
Stay active most days of the week?	☐	☐
Get enough sleep and manage stress well?	☐	☐
Know your heart-health numbers (e.g. blood pressure, cholesterol)?	☐	☐

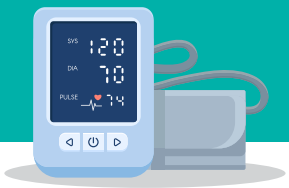
Note This quiz offers general guidance and is not a substitute for personalised medical advice from a qualified healthcare professional.

What now?

Mostly 'Usually'?	✓	**Amazing** – your habits are supporting a healthy heart! Keep going.
A mix of both?	✓ ✗	**Pick 1-2 areas to improve** – small steps make a big difference.
Mostly 'Rarely'?	✗	**Don't worry** – this quiz is for awareness, not judgement. Choose one simple change to start with today.

If you haven't had your **blood pressure or cholesterol** checked in a while, book a check-up – even if you feel fine.

High blood pressure and cholesterol often have **no symptoms**.



Irish Heart Foundation Supports

For more information on heart health, visit irishheart.ie

Irish Heart Foundation Nurse Support Line
Available from 9am to 5pm every Monday, and from 9am to 1pm Tuesday to Friday.

Phone: 01 668 5001

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Notes...

Notes...

Disclaimer

This publication is provided for general information only, and does not constitute medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. If you suspect that you have a medical problem or condition, please seek the advice of a qualified healthcare professional immediately.

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Irish Heart Foundation

The National Stroke & Heart Charity

The Irish Heart Foundation is a community of people who fight to protect the cardiovascular health of everyone in Ireland.

Irish Heart Foundation
17-19 Rathmines Road Lower,
Dublin 6, D06 C780.

01 668 5001

info@irishheart.ie

Follow us on

RCN: 20008376 CRO: 23434

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