



HeartKids

Body image and CHD

Information on body image for people with congenital or childhood heart conditions.



What is body image?

Body image is how you think and feel about your body and appearance.

Feeling comfortable and relaxed about your body is considered a positive body image. It can improve feelings of self-esteem.

Negative body image occurs when you believe your body isn't good enough. It can bring feelings of unhappiness and dissatisfaction.

Body image changes over time. Internal factors that can influence your body image include your age and personality. External factors include what you see on TV or social media, your culture, and your social environment.



30%
of young Australians
(15 - 19 years)
report experiencing
body image concerns.¹

How can CHD impact body image?²

When you've grown up with a heart condition, you may have some other factors influencing your body image.

These can include:

- scars from surgeries or procedures
- changes in the colour of your skin or complexion
- physical limitations, or not being able to do all the things your peers can

Body image to me is more about making sure I look healthy. That's what is important to me.

I'm okay with wrinkles and ageing. I just want to look and feel healthy.

— Elle, 39 years

What impact can scars have on body image?

Having scars may:

- change the way you look in clothing
- trigger memories of medical trauma or serve as reminders of physical limitations
- prompt people to ask you questions about your body or your health



My scar is my badge of honour now. It's not the prettiest, it's definitely not the straightest, but that's what I love about it. It's part of my story. It's part of a journey that not many people have been through.

— Sam, 31 years

Thinking about your scars

If you are concerned about your scars, reframing what they mean to you may be helpful.

Some people view their scars as physical reminders of their strength and resilience. Viewing your scars in this way can help to reduce angst and anxiety, and increase your appreciation for your own health.

Meeting other people with similar scars, experiences and stories can also be helpful.

Talking about your scars

Sometimes people may be curious about your scars. Often they don't realise that asking about them could make you feel uncomfortable.

You might like to develop some responses to these questions that you feel comfortable with. Remember that you don't need to disclose your medical history to someone if you don't want to.

Growing up with a scar was quite challenging at first. I felt different at school swimming carnivals when everyone took their shirts off.

I was really self-conscious until I went to a HeartKids Teen Camp and met other teens with scars like mine. It was such a supportive and empowering environment.

Being surrounded by people my age with similar conditions was a gamechanger for me.

— Samuel, 23 years

How do I tell someone I have a heart condition?

What you tell someone about your heart condition, and when, is up to you.

When you feel comfortable enough, you may choose to tell them. While it may seem a bit daunting at first, it gets easier with a bit of practice.

It can be good to tell your friends or the people you spend a lot of time with about your heart condition. This will enable them to be mindful of your condition, and to offer you support if you need it.

I've never been scared to talk about my heart condition or wear things that might show my scar.

I think that it's such an empowering thing to be dealt these cards and not be afraid of them.

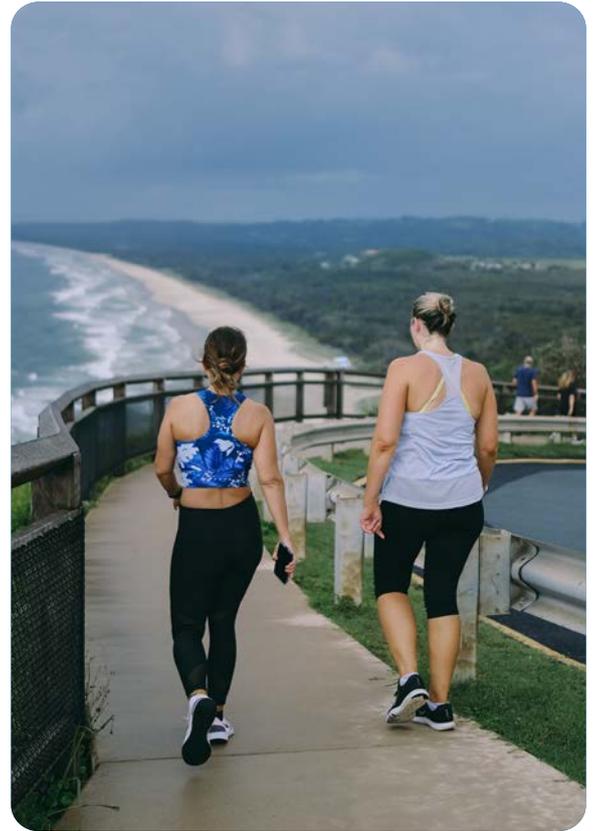
My heart is part of my story, but it's not everything, and I'm proud of it.

— Caitlin, 20 years

I've never found my heart condition too limiting. When I was younger, I think I limited myself more than it limited me.

As I've gotten older, I've learned where my comfort levels are with different activities. I'm grateful for everything my body allows me to do.

— Eve, 23 years



After six open-heart surgeries, there are some limitations on what my body can do. It definitely got me down a bit when I was a teenager, but meeting other young people in a similar situation has really helped me.

It's been a journey learning how to not exceed my physical limits, but also how to not over-restrict myself. Now, I try not to focus on the restricted side of my heart condition. I focus on what I can do, and give it my all when I do it.

— George, 22 years

How can I improve my body image?

Feeling good about your body is important for your mental health and wellbeing.

Some tips:

- **Move your body:** Regular exercise can help you to feel more confident about your body and your body image (talk to your cardiologist about the best kind of exercise for you)
- **Focus on what your body CAN do**
- **Be kind to yourself:** Talk to yourself how you might talk to one of your friends
- **Connect with other people with CHD**
- **Avoid making comparisons to others**
- **Choose what media you consume:** Unfollow the Instagram page if it's making you feel self-conscious
- **Talk to someone you trust:** Get some outside perspective from a friend, family member or your GP
- **Get professional help from a psychologist or therapist**



Physical Limitations

There are many different types of CHD. Some people with CHD have almost normal heart function. Other people have more complex problems that mean they may have some physical limitations. Make sure you talk to your cardiologist about your condition. They can provide advice suited to your situation.

Where to find more information and support

Butterfly Foundation

 butterfly.org.au

ReachOut

 au.reachout.com

HeartKids

 heartkids.org.au

Learn more about CHD and the support HeartKids can offer you.

 1800 432 785

Call the HeartKids Helpline for support and guidance.

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References

- ¹ Tiller, E., Greenland, N., Christie, R., Kos, A., Brennan, N., & Di Nicola, K. (2021). Youth Survey Report 2021. Sydney, NSW: Mission Australia
- ² Jackson, J., Gerardo, G. & Vannatta, K. (2017). Perceptions of Disease-Related Stress: A Key to Better Understanding Outcomes Among Survivors of Congenital Heart Disease. *Journal of Cardiovascular Nursing*, 32(6): 587-593.

This fact sheet was reviewed and updated by HeartKids in March 2023. It was endorsed by the HeartKids Clinical Advisory Committee at the time of publication. Clinical information might change after this date. The information in this fact sheet is general. It is not a substitute for medical advice from your doctor. Always talk to your doctor about matters that affect your or your family's health. Got some feedback about our resources? Go to: heartkids.org.au/feedback