


# Taking it to heart

How healthy do you have to be to protect yourself from heart disease? These three women find out after a body check at the Singapore Heart Foundation. **BY JOYCE LIN**



## *The big eater*

**Grace Lim, 34, single**

**Job:** Spa manager

**Working hours a week:** 44

**Height/weight:** 1.58m/56kg

**BMI:** 22.4


**Drinks:** No

**Smokes:** No

**Exercise:** Twice a week at the gym, doing both cardio and toning exercises.

**Diet:** Three regular meals a day. Must have carbs (either bread, rice or noodles) at every meal, vegetables and meat, and two servings of fruit every day.

**Family history of heart problems:** None



*The very  
stressed-out  
professional*

**Rekha Kaur, 25,  
single**

**Job:** Business executive

**Working hours a week:** 40

**Height/Weight:** 1.63m/62kg

**BMI:** 23.3

**Drinks:** 3 glasses of wine and 2 beers while partying with friends once a week.

**Smokes:** 10 sticks a day. Smoking since age 19.

**Exercise:** Gym activities – cardio machines and kickboxing or yoga classes 2-3 times a week.

**Diet:** A granola bar for breakfast, tuna sandwich for lunch, fruits for snacks and noodle soup for dinner. Occasional ice cream indulgence.

**Family history of heart disease:** None

*The one with  
the family  
history*

**Janice Lee Fang, 29,  
married**

**Job:** Brand manager

**Working hours a week:** 60

**Height/weight:** 1.58m/47kg

**BMI:** 18.8

**Drinks:** 2-4 glasses of wine or beer a week. Mostly to unwind.

**Smokes:** No

**Exercise:** Running 2-3 times a week, cycling 1-2 times a week.

**Diet:** Anything and everything but always in moderation. Lots of carbs, vegetables, and fresh food.

**Family history:** Dad suffers from high blood pressure and has a heart condition which runs in the family. →

**H**ear disease is the second biggest killer in Singapore after cancer, with 2,000 lives lost each year, according to the World Health Organisation. While figures show that more men still die from heart-related diseases, women shouldn't feel complacent about their heart health. In fact, one in four women in Singapore die from cardiac-related ailments; five times more than those who die from breast cancer.

While there are no official figures on heart disease rates among younger women in Singapore, experts say lifestyle factors like smoking and obesity can increase your risk dramatically (see boxed story on page 292).

We asked Dr Goh Ping Ping to examine the different lifestyles of three women and determine who is putting their lives at most risk of this deadly disease. Dr Goh is the head of cardiology at Changi General Hospital, a board member of the Singapore Heart Foundation (SHF) and chairwoman of the Go Red for Women Campaign, founded by the American Heart Association, which aims to raise awareness of women's heart health.

## Highest risk

### REKHA'S TEST RESULTS:

**Blood pressure:** 112/69 mmHg

**Random glucose:** 4.5 mmol/L

**Total cholesterol:** 4.79 mg/dlmmol/L

### Dr Goh's comments:

"Rekha is at highest risk of heart disease. Her blood pressure, random glucose and total cholesterol might be within normal limits. However, she is at high risk because of her smoking, the highest risk factor. This is further compounded by a high BMI. Most scientific journals peg the normal body mass index (BMI) range for Asians at 18.5 to 22.9, so Rekha's BMI is still considered towards the high side of 23.3. She should aim for a BMI of 20 to 21 (by losing 4kg from her current weight) and she can do this by increasing her frequency of exercise and increasing the intensity of her workouts to lose weight. Drinking is also a no-no if you're at high risk of heart disease. If you can, don't drink at all. But if you do, limit it to one or two glasses of wine a week."

### Rekha says:

"I was quite surprised by the results, as I expected worse because of my lifestyle vices! I didn't know that a BMI of more than 23 was deemed to be on the high side, although I am trying to lose weight. My target weight is 55kg, which will make my BMI lower at 20.7. I don't think that I drink a lot, since I only go partying once a week. But now that I know that my lifestyle puts me at high risk, I'll definitely cut down on my smoking. I've been taking active steps to change my lifestyle, such as trying to visit the gym more, eating healthier, and trying to smoke and drink less."



"I didn't know that a BMI of more than 23 was deemed to be on the high side."

## Fast facts

Guidelines for cholesterol, blood sugar and blood pressure levels:

### **BLOOD PRESSURE:**

Not more than 120/80 mmHg

### **BLOOD SUGAR:**

Not more than 6.1 mmol/L

### **TOTAL CHOLESTEROL:**

Not more than 5.2 mmol/L

### **GOOD CHOLESTEROL:**

Not more than 1.3 mmol/L

### **BAD CHOLESTEROL:**

Not more than 4.1 mmol/L for people who are at low risk of heart disease

## Lowest risk

### **GRACE'S TEST RESULTS:**

Blood pressure: 110/75 mmHg

Random glucose: 4.7 mmol/L

Total cholesterol: 4.61 mg/dlmmol/L

### **Dr Goh's comments:**

"Grace is at lowest risk of heart disease. Her blood pressure, random glucose and total cholesterol are within normal limits and she does not have any risk factors. But she could look into her diet and see what kind of carbs she's eating. She can opt for less refined carbs such as whole grains, which are high in fibre and tend to make you feel fuller for longer. She can maintain her current body weight, but for even better heart health, she should aim for cardio exercise up to five times a week."

### **Grace says:**

"I was happy with the test results, especially since it

"I don't think I'll cut down on my carbs as it's one of my indulgences."

shows me that I'm getting positive results from working out for the past five years and eating healthily too. I don't think I'll cut down on my carbs as it's one of my indulgences. But I'll take Dr Goh's advice and try to exercise more frequently, since I am trying to lose another 2kg. Having the blood test done has made me more reassured that the efforts I've put into my health haven't been in vain, and it has motivated me to want to work out more – especially since the gym is just next door! I think it wouldn't be a problem at all for me to increase my workouts to five times a week to improve my fitness levels even more."



## Medium risk

### JANICE'S TEST RESULTS:

**Blood pressure:** 117/70 mmHg

**Random glucose:** 5.5 mmol/L

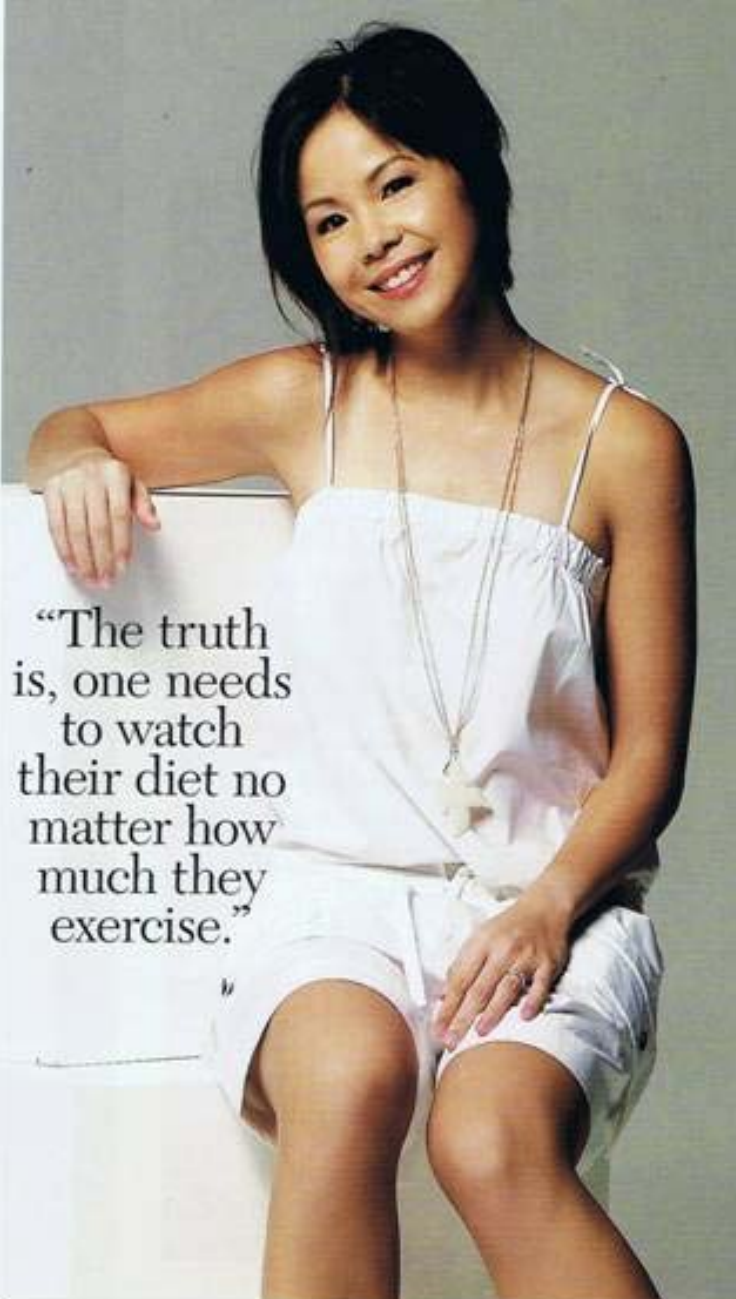
**Total cholesterol:** 5.93mg/dlmmol/L

### Dr Goh's comments:

"Janice is at medium risk of heart disease. Her blood pressure and random glucose levels are normal. However, her total cholesterol level is high but we'll need a more detailed analysis to determine whether her bad (LDL) cholesterol levels are high as well. Her family history puts her at higher risk for heart disease, and may also be the cause of her high cholesterol. Her stress level is also high due to long working hours, which may raise her blood pressure levels. But she can combat all these through lifestyle changes – her current exercise regime is good for maintaining her current weight and fitness levels, and to improve overall heart health. She should still continue to watch what she eats, and avoid alcohol and foods that are high in cholesterol."

### Janice says:

"I was quite surprised by the results, since I do exercise quite a bit and keep a generally healthy lifestyle. I was definitely expecting better. However, I do know that my family has a history of health problems which I have to watch out for as I get older. The test made me think about my diet a bit more – being someone who trains a lot in endurance sport, there is a tendency to think I can eat whatever I want and whenever I want it. But the truth is, one needs to watch their diet no matter how much they exercise. I can eat a lot, but I probably need to look into eating less of rich foods. I'm a big fan of laksa and curries, but I know that they're high in bad cholesterol, so I'll be trying to eat less."



"The truth is, one needs to watch their diet no matter how much they exercise."

## Are you at risk?

Here's the lowdown on the risk factors for heart disease (from highest to lowest).

- **SMOKING** Time to stub out! Smokers are two to three times more at risk than non-smokers when it comes to sudden cardiac deaths. Smoking causes 40 per cent of deaths caused by heart disease in patients younger than 65. The nicotine habit also leads to heart attack, stroke, high blood pressure, blood vessel disease, cancer and lung disease.
- **OBESITY** People with excess body fat – especially around the waist – are more prone to developing heart disease and stroke even if they have no other risk factors. Excess weight increases the strain on the heart, and raises your blood pressure and cholesterol levels.
- **LIFESTYLE** Get moving! Being a couch potato and not watching what you eat puts you at higher risk for

heart disease. Aim for regular, moderate physical activity (eg cardio three times a week), which will help you shed excess weight, lower blood pressure and improve cholesterol levels.

- **STRESS** Your blood pressure spikes momentarily when you get angry and when you are under stress. If you experience constant stress over a prolonged period of time, you may be at a higher risk of developing high blood pressure, leading to a heart attack.
- **DRINKING** If you're thinking of having just a little tippie, think twice. Alcohol can lead to irregular heartbeats and blood pressure.
- **FAMILY HISTORY** Depending on how distant your relative is, your chances of suffering from heart disease may be higher if a direct family member suffers from it, but it's not the be all and end all since your lifestyle still plays a huge part.

## Hearty diet

Jamie Llow, nutritionist from the Singapore Heart Foundation, gives some pointers on eating right for good heart health.

- **Follow the 3-5-7 diet plan for good heart health.** When planning your meals, your 3 highs should come from foods high in fibre, freshness and plant-based protein (from grapes, oats and tomatoes). Keep to the 5 lows – low fat, cholesterol, salt, sugar and alcohol – and eat until you're 70 per cent full.
- **2 cups of coffee a day may just protect your heart.** By sticking to the daily caffeine limit, the small amount of caffeine could be beneficial to women's heart health, according to a recent study conducted on 84,000 women published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*. The researchers found that women who drank two cups of caffeinated coffee daily had a 25 per cent lower risk of death from heart disease.

• **Think your lunchtime sandwich snack is healthy?** Not necessarily, if you choose unrefined carbs like white bread, and spread huge dollops of mayo or sour cream. Your best bet is to ask for more veggies, less meat (to cut down on saturated fat), and to choose salad dressing like ketchup or mustard instead.

• **Don't just rely on your multi-vitamins alone.** There's no magic pill for good health, as shown in a study involving 8,000 women done by a researcher at Harvard Medical School. These women took vitamin A, C and other antioxidant pills over 12 years but still had the vitamins' effects negated by smoking, not exercising and having imbalanced diets. **HW**

