



# Helen's Journey to Better Heart Health

**Employer:** South Durham Health CIC

**Area:** Healthy Eating & Physical Activity

**Theme:** Health Checks



## *Helen's Journey to Better Heart Health*

**Background:** Helen, a proactive and health-conscious woman, found herself startled after completing the NHS "Calculate Your Heart Age" tool. Despite her active lifestyle, excellent diet, and healthy BMI, the tool revealed that her heart age was 10 years older than her actual age. This revelation prompted her to take further steps toward understanding her cardiovascular health.

**Initial Concerns:** Helen has always been committed to maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Even after undergoing a recent hip operation, she stayed active, ensuring that her exercise routine was adapted to her recovery. Her diet is varied and balanced, emphasizing fresh, whole foods, and her BMI is within the healthy range. However, Helen's family history of cardiovascular disease raised concerns about her long-term heart health. Her father had suffered a heart attack at a young age, and her brother had recently been diagnosed with hypertension and is on medication for high cholesterol.

Given this family history and the surprising heart age result, Helen decided to take her health further into consideration by booking an appointment with her GP to get a cholesterol blood test.

**The Decision to Get Checked:** Helen's strong family history of heart disease, combined with her elevated heart age result, motivated her to seek a professional evaluation. Her GP ordered a cholesterol blood test, along with a recent blood pressure check, to assess any potential underlying issues contributing to her heart health.

**Blood Test Results:** Upon receiving her test results, Helen learned more about her cholesterol levels and blood pressure, and the information was eye-opening. While her cholesterol wasn't in a dangerously high range, the results were enough to make her realise that small lifestyle adjustments could still have a significant impact. Encouraged by her GP and motivated by her family history, she took another step to recheck her heart age using the NHS tool.

**A Positive Change:** After receiving her cholesterol results, Helen completed the heart age survey once more. To her delight, she saw an improvement: her heart age had decreased by 6 years.

**Next Steps and Recommendations:** Although Helen had seen a positive change in her heart age, it's important to note that her family history of heart disease still posed a significant risk. While lifestyle changes such as a heart-healthy diet, regular exercise, and stress management are all beneficial, Helen was advised to continue working closely with her GP.



**Conclusion:** Helen's case serves as a reminder that family history plays a critical role in our overall health, particularly in relation to cardiovascular disease. Even with an active lifestyle, balanced diet, and healthy weight, external factors such as genetics can influence our heart health. However, Helen's proactive approach—seeking medical advice, monitoring her cholesterol, and adjusting her lifestyle—has already led to an improvement in her heart health. Continued communication with her GP will ensure she stays on the right path to preventing future cardiovascular problems.

*"When Debbie sent through the link to the NHS Heart Health check tool it coincided with my brother (55yrs, fit – completed an Ironman last year) being recently diagnosed with hypertension & high cholesterol (now on statins). I was horrified my heart health was calculated at 68yrs (I am only 58yrs) & the factor which was affecting my score adversely was the fact my father had a heart attack at 55yrs so I contacted my GP to request a cholesterol & BP check. This was done on 7th March and my BP was 110/70. My cholesterol result arrived today and it is higher than advised so I am seeking advice & guidance on how to reduce this. I plan to ask for a re-test in 2-3months."*

**Update from Helen:** "Since receiving blood test results which show a slightly raised cholesterol level I have started using Benecol spread instead of other spreads. I am reducing the amount of caffeine I consume, focussing more on herbal teas or water. I have also reduced the number of processed meats I am consuming and I have made at least 3 meals per week meat free, substituting for fish and beans/lentils/vegetables. I am taking 2 desert spoons of apple cider vinegar in warm water daily before my main meal as anecdotally I hope this also assists my cholesterol level."

*"My father had a heart attack at the age of 55, resulting in a triple heart bypass. I do not want this to happen to me so I'm making food and health decisions which I hope will reduce my risk."*

