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## Is the NHS 'Heart Age Test' too much medicine?

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*Published in:*  
Journal of the Royal College of General Practitioners

*DOI:*  
[10.3399/bjgp19X706349](https://doi.org/10.3399/bjgp19X706349)

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*Recommended citation(APA):*  
Bonner, C., McKinn, S., McCaffrey, K., Glasziou, P., Irwig, L., Doust, J., Jansen, J., & Bell, K. (2019). Is the NHS 'Heart Age Test' too much medicine? *Journal of the Royal College of General Practitioners*, 69(688), 560-561. <https://doi.org/10.3399/bjgp19X706349>

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### Is the NHS 'Heart Age Test' Too Much Medicine?

Journal:	<i>British Journal of General Practice</i>
Manuscript ID	BJGP-2019-0054.R1
Manuscript Type:	Life & Times
Date Submitted by the Author:	14-Mar-2019
Complete List of Authors:	Bonner, Carissa; University of Sydney, Faculty of Medicine and Health, School of Public Health McKinn, Shannon; University of Sydney, Faculty of Medicine and Health, School of Public Health; McCaffery, Kirsten; University of Sydney, Faculty of Medicine and Health, School of Public Health Glasziou, Paul; Bond University, Faculty of Health Sciences and Medicine Irwig, Les; University of Sydney, Faculty of Medicine and Health, School of Public Health Doust, Jenny; Bond University, Faculty of Health Sciences and Medicine Jansen, Jesse; University of Sydney, Faculty of Medicine and Health, School of Public Health Bell, Katy; University of Sydney, Faculty of Medicine and Health, School of Public Health
Keywords:	Screening < Health promotion and prevention, Cardiovascular disease < Clinical (physical)

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1 Word did not find any entries for your table of contents. **TITLE:** Is the NHS ‘Heart Age Test’  
2 Too Much Medicine?

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12  
13 **WORD COUNT:** 1671



## 16 INTRODUCTION

17 The NHS 'Heart Age Test' has expanded CVD risk assessment in the UK to include younger  
18 people. Public Health England's 'Healthy Heart' campaign, launched in September 2018,  
19 encourages all adults aged 30+ years to do the test (see Figure 1), stating: "*Having a heart age  
20 older than your chronological age means that you are at a higher risk of having a heart attack or  
21 stroke.*" But does older heart age really mean high risk? The calculator will give you an older age  
22 if at least one CVD risk factor is higher than the level set as 'optimal'; but this does not  
23 necessarily mean you are at high risk of a CVD event in the next 10 years, as shown by the  
24 examples in Figure 1. Is there evidence to support PHE's promotion of the heart age test? To find  
25 out, we evaluated the 'Heart Age Test' according to Public Health England's own National  
26 Screening Committee criteria. This analysis suggests heart age is not a good screening test.

### 28 **Figure 1. NHS 'Heart Age Test' [INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]**

29 **Caption:** Heart Age Test results for a 35 year-old woman at low risk of CVD (Case 1, Table 1).

31 **1. The condition should be an important health problem as judged by its frequency and/or  
32 severity.** CVD is an important health problem. The rate of death from CVD has declined  
33 throughout the UK in the last 3 decades,(1) but CVD remains the leading cause of death in men  
34 and second leading cause of death in women, with around 160,000 people in the UK dying from  
35 CVD every year.

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2  
3 37 **2. There should be a simple, safe, precise and validated screening test.** Though the ‘Heart  
4  
5 38 Age Test’ calculator is simple and physically safe to use, it is not precise or validated. Heart age  
6  
7 39 is estimated from the lifetime risk of CVD, relative to people of the same age, gender and  
8  
9  
10 40 ethnicity who have ‘optimal’ risk factor levels (e.g. non-smoker, systolic blood pressure <120  
11  
12 41 mm Hg).(2) The authors of the last update of the NICE guidelines on CVD risk assessment in  
13  
14 42 2014 found insufficient evidence to recommend lifetime risk as a validated screening test. There  
15  
16 43 is even less evidence for indirect measures of lifetime risk, such as heart age.  
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22  
23 45 **3. The distribution of test values in the target population should be known and a suitable**  
24  
25 46 **cut-off level defined and agreed.** The ‘Heart Age Test’ targets everyone aged 30+ years, and is  
26  
27 47 disproportionately used by younger people <40 years.(2) In contrast, formal CVD risk  
28  
29 48 assessment as part of NHS Health Checks targets people  $\geq 40$  years. According to Public Health  
30  
31 49 England, of two million ‘Heart Age Test’ users the majority (78%) had older heart age. All are  
32  
33 50 prompted to visit a GP and described as having ‘increased risk of heart disease’, but there has  
34  
35 51 been no assessment on the suitability of [heart age – chronological age] >0 as a cut-off level to  
36  
37 52 prompt further testing.  
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42 53  
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45 54 **4. The test, from sample collection to delivery of results, should be acceptable to the target**  
46  
47 55 **population.** The acceptability of heart age depends on whether it matches users’ expectations. A  
48  
49 56 ‘think aloud’ study found that older heart age was confronting and discredited by users if it did  
50  
51 57 not match prior risk perception; while younger heart age was viewed as positive but  
52  
53 58 unrealistic.(3) A randomised trial confirmed that heart age was perceived as less credible and  
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3 59 elicits more negative emotions compared to absolute CVD risk.(4) Further acceptability issues  
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5 60 are highlighted by public responses (Supplement 1).  
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9  
10 62 **5. There should be an agreed policy on the further diagnostic investigation of individuals**  
11  
12 **with a positive test result and on the choices available to those individuals.** There is no  
13 63  
14  
15 64 agreed policy on further investigation of individuals with older heart age results (i.e. 78% of  
16  
17 65 users). It prompts people to have an NHS Health Check, which is recommended for those over  
18  
19 66 40 and which itself is controversial. A Cochrane review found no evidence that these checks are  
20  
21 67 beneficial, and they may even cause harm through the diagnosis and treatment of conditions  
22  
23 68 unlikely to cause symptoms or death (i.e. overdiagnosis and overtreatment).(5) Encouraging  
24  
25 69 large numbers of asymptomatic young people to have their blood pressure and cholesterol  
26  
27 70 measured is not an agreed policy with the RCGP or the UK National Screening Committee.  
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34  
35 72 **6. There should be agreed evidence-based policies covering which individuals should be**  
36  
37 73 **offered interventions and the appropriate intervention to be offered.** Convincing patients  
38  
39 74 with CVD risk factors to change their lifestyle is important at any age, and heart age could be  
40  
41 75 used for this.(6) An RCT found that online assessment of heart age can improve risk factor  
42  
43 76 management compared to verbal counselling about absolute risk.(7) However, direct  
44  
45 77 experimental comparisons between heart age and absolute risk have found no effect on lifestyle  
46  
47 78 intentions or behaviour.(4) Where heart age has motivated lifestyle change, this has been within  
48  
49 79 a clinical context. This is quite different to a pre-consultation screening test, where existing  
50  
51 80 lifestyle and circumstances are not taken into account, resulting in implausible heart age  
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53 81 estimates that discredit the results (e.g. older heart age in very fit people, or younger heart age in  
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3 82 obese people).(3) Medication guidelines recommend assessing the absolute risk of a CVD event  
4  
5 83 and prioritising treatment to those at highest risk who are most likely to benefit.(8) Absolute risk  
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7  
8 84 is preferred for treatment decisions, rather than single risk factors such as blood pressure (9) or  
9  
10 85 cholesterol. Heart age is an ill-defined measure of risk, relative to others of the same age, gender  
11  
12 86 and ethnicity with optimal risk factor levels.(3,10) As it is not a measure of absolute risk, it is not  
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14  
15 87 helpful for medication decisions.(4,10)  
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21 89 **7. There should be evidence from high quality randomised controlled trials that screening**  
22  
23 90 **is effective in reducing mortality or morbidity.** There is evidence for several interventions that  
24  
25 91 might be prompted through heart age screening, including smoking advice and lowering blood  
26  
27 92 pressure/cholesterol. However, the Cochrane review of health checks shows that promoting these  
28  
29 93 in a non-targeted way has no impact on actual CVD,(5) possibly because it attracts people at  
30  
31 94 lower, rather than higher, risk. Since predominantly younger people use the ‘Heart Age Test’,(2)  
32  
33 95 it may exacerbate the problem of low risk people attending health checks. There is no trial  
34  
35 96 evidence that using heart age to screen for CVD risk or prompt formal CVD assessment reduces  
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37 97 mortality or morbidity.  
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45 99 **8. The benefit gained by individuals from the screening programme should outweigh any**  
46  
47 100 **harms.** The ‘Heart Age Test’ has no direct evidence of benefit, and there is potential for harm.  
48  
49 101 Heart age results may lead high risk people to disregard relevant risk information if they don’t  
50  
51 102 believe the results, and cause low risk people to worry and seek unnecessary tests.(3,4) Other  
52  
53 103 potential harms include negative psychological and behavioural effects of disease labelling,  
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3 104 physical harms and side effects of unnecessary tests or treatment for CVD, hassles and cost of  
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5 105 unnecessary tests and treatments, wasted resources and opportunity costs to the health system.  
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8 106 These harms, which contribute to overmedicalisation of society in general,(11) should not be  
9  
10 107 underestimated.

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16 109 **9. The opportunity cost of the screening programme (including testing, diagnosis and**  
17  
18 110 **treatment, administration, training and quality assurance) should be economically**  
19  
20 111 **balanced in relation to expenditure on medical care as a whole.** The ‘Heart Age Test’ tells  
21  
22 112 anyone over 30 to make an appointment with their GP, nurse or pharmacist to have their  
23  
24 113 cholesterol level or blood pressure measured if this is unknown. This may add to GPs’ already  
25  
26 114 overburdened workload, increase waiting times and detract attention from necessary high value  
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28 115 care/ treatments for patients who are unwell.  
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36 117 **10. Evidence-based information, explaining the purpose and potential consequences of**  
37  
38 118 **screening, investigation and preventative intervention or treatment, should be made**  
39  
40 119 **available to potential participants to assist them in making an informed choice.** There is  
41  
42 120 very little published information explaining what exactly heart age represents to enable an  
43  
44 121 informed choice on whether or not to use it. As a GP wrote recently in The BMJ Opinion:

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48 122 *“I’ve looked at the supporting documents and can’t find any answers. Perhaps they’re*  
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50 123 *there if you dig deep enough through the JBS3 website (which the tool points you*  
51  
52 124 *towards), but that’s not the point. If I can’t find the answer after 20 minutes of looking,*  
53  
54 125 *who else is going to bother? The public deserve to know how accurate these estimates*



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3 126 *are. Presenting uncertainty as fact is not what the public, or our patients, want or need.”*  
4  
5 127 *(BMJ Blogs, 2018 Sept 12)*  
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7

8 128 The ‘Heart Age Test’ provides no information about who should use it, recommends cholesterol  
9  
10 129 and blood pressure testing for everyone who does not enter values for these, and provides no  
11  
12 130 information about the potential benefits, harms and costs of having these additional tests done  
13  
14 131 and of taking any medication which might subsequently be offered.(10) It is therefore not  
15  
16 132 possible to make an informed choice about using it.(12) Furthermore, the ‘Heart Age Test’ may  
17  
18 133 confuse people when heart age and absolute risk are contradicting (e.g. low risk but heart age  
19  
20 134 higher than own age), and convey conflicting messages about the person’s risk and the need for  
21  
22 135 medication.(3)  
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## 30 137 **CONCLUSION**

31  
32  
33 138 The ‘Heart Age Test’ is effectively a screening test that expands CVD risk assessment to include  
34  
35 139 younger people without proper consultation or informed consent. It encourages almost 80% of –  
36  
37 140 mostly young – users to see their GP for further medical interventions. Apart from being a test  
38  
39 141 for an important condition (CVD), the ‘Heart Age Test’ meets none of the National Health  
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41 142 England’s own assessment criteria for a potentially useful screening test. As stated in a recent  
42  
43 143 article about the de-adoption of ineffective clinical practices:  
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48 144 *“We need to take a more cautious approach to technology adoption, and learn from*  
49  
50 145 *mistakes of early adoption of health care technologies based on little or low-quality*  
51  
52 146 *clinical evidence. This way we can prevent the need to ‘break up’ with the practice when*  
53  
54 147 *the high-quality evidence shows that it is ineffective.”* (New York Times, 2018 Sept 11)  
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3 148 The NHS might do well to take this advice before adopting and promoting online technologies  
4  
5 149 such as heart age calculators. The results of heart age calculators should be limited to lifestyle  
6  
7 150 advice, ideally within the setting of the clinical consultation, to avoid inadvertent population  
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9 151 screening for CVD using an unvalidated screening test.  
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For Review Only

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3 **153 AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS**

4 **154**  
5 **155** KB and JJ are the guarantors of the article and drafted the manuscript with CB, based on her PhD  
6  
7  
8 **156** investigating CVD risk communication, including heart age. All authors contributed to  
9  
10 **157** discussion and revision of the paper. CB, SM, KM and JJ are psychology academics with  
11  
12 **158** expertise in shared decision making and risk communication. KB and LI are clinical  
13  
14 **159** epidemiologists with expertise in test evaluation and CVD risk models. PG and JD are academic  
15  
16  
17 **160** GPs with expertise in evidence-based practice and clinical CVD guidelines.  
18

19 **161**  
20 **162 CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

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22  
23 **163** We declare that we have no conflicts of interest to report.  
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25 **164**

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**HOW HEALTHY IS YOUR HEART?**

The Heart Age Test:

- Tells you your heart age compared to your real age
- Explains why it's important to know your blood pressure and cholesterol numbers
- Gives advice on how to reduce your heart age

**START**

Full [terms and conditions](#) can be read here

**YOUR HEART AGE IS ABOUT 37**

Compared to a person of the same age, gender and ethnicity without raised risk factors.

On average, someone like you can expect to live to the age of **82** without having a heart attack or stroke.

[About your calculation](#)

See how your heart age changes if you:

Lose weight i

**YOUR HEART AGE IS ABOUT 37**

Compared to a person of the

Your risk of having a heart attack or stroke within the next 10 years is **0.4%**

Your heart age is higher than your actual age. You can lower it by making some simple changes to your diet and lifestyle.

Heart Age Test results for a 35 year-old woman at low risk of CVD (Case 1, Table 1)