

Heart TALK

Heart-healthy and Stroke-free Living with Dr. Amy L. Doneen, DNP, ARNP

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Thoughts from Dr. Amy

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As spring flowers blossom and gardens become green, it's a great time to take your workout outdoors. Physical activity in natural settings has been linked to longer life, lower rates of illness--including heart attack and stroke--and a greater sense of well-being, reports the [American Public Health Association](#) (APHA). Here's a look at 6 science-backed benefits of "green exercise."

1. A vitamin D boost and 22% lower risk for heart attack. A [recent Harvard study](#) of more than 18,000 people found that people who exercise vigorously (such as running or jogging) 3 or more hours weekly have a 22% lower risk for heart attack--for a reason that might surprise you. The researchers discovered that people who work out vigorously have higher levels of vitamin D. "People who exercise tend to be out in the sun, which raises their vitamin D level." lead study author Andrea Chomistek stated. Another [large study](#) highlighted the risks of *not* getting enough of the sunshine vitamin: Those with the lowest vitamin D levels were

40% more likely to develop heart disease and 81% more likely to die from it than those with optimal levels.

2. A brighter mood in minutes. Getting even 5 minutes of physical activity in a natural setting--such as hiking, cycling, horse-back riding, or gardening--benefits mental health, by raising mood, self-esteem and sense of personal well-being, according to [a study](#) of more than 1,200 people. Other [recent research](#) reports that exercising outdoors is linked to greater feelings of revitalization and energy, and reduced tension, confusion, depression and anger, than do indoor workouts.

3. A natural way to sleep better. In [a 2015 study](#), men and older adults who spend time in green spaces, whether it's biking in a nearby park, walking along a sandy beach, or simply enjoying an ocean view, report improved sleep. "It's hard to overestimate the importance of high-quality sleep," said researcher Diana Grigsby-Toussaint. "Studies show that inadequate sleep is associated with declines in mental and physical health, reduced cognitive function, and increased obesity." Skimping on slumber also raises heart attack and stroke risk.

4. Lower blood pressure. At every age, green exercise has cardiovascular benefits. For example, [a 2014 study of children](#) found that those who viewed natural scenes (such as a video of a forest environment) while biking had lower blood pressure 15 minutes later, compared to kids who didn't see the video. Outdoor sports and play [also help](#)

[protect children](#) from developing diabetes, heart disease, and even near-sightedness, and cuts their risk for depression and anxiety,

5. A healthier heart rate. Not only does a lunchtime walk in nature spark immediate improvements in physical and psychological wellbeing, but it also continues to improve heart health later in the day, [a 2016 study](#) found. On two different days, study participants either walked 1.8 kilometers in a built or natural environment at a similar pace at lunchtime, then their heart rate variability (HRV) was measured that night as they slept. After green exercise, participants had increased HRV at night, suggesting that nature walks may enhance cardiovascular wellness and help protect against CVD. Reduced HRV has

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Green Exercise | For Vibrant Heart Health, Eat The Rainbow

been identified as a risk factor for developing heart disease.

6. Longer life. Want to add up to 7 years to your life? Lace up your sneakers and take a 20-to-25-minute outdoor walk daily. In [a 2015 study](#) of people ages 30 to 60, those who engaged in daily aerobic activity, including brisk walking, jogging, and high-intensity interval training, had anti-aging benefits that could increase their lifespan by 3 to 7 years. This fun fitness tip can help you move more: Listening to upbeat music not only makes walking more enjoyable, but can boost your endurance by up to 15%, according to the [American Council on Exercise](#). That's a wonderful reason to plug in your headphones, go outdoors, and start putting more spring into your step!

For Vibrant Health, Eat The Rainbow

Did you know that eating a variety of colorful fruits and vegetables can have amazing benefits, including lowering your risk for heart attack, stroke, high blood pressure, diabetes and several forms of cancer? What's more, eating certain vegetables may be linked to better memory and longer life, recent studies suggest.

Yet fewer than one in ten adults eat the recommended amount of these nutritional powerhouses, according to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). One easy way to reach your goal: fill half your plate with fruits and vegetables at each meal. For a full spectrum of health benefits, include these colors in your daily diet:

Red: Lycopene is the pigment that gives some fruits, such as tomatoes, their ruby hue. Several [studies](#) suggest that tomatoes, which are also high in disease-fighting antioxidants, vitamins A and C, folic acid, and beta carotene, have surprisingly powerful benefits for vascular health, including reducing levels of oxidized LDL cholesterol (the kind that can form plaque in the coronary arteries) in both healthy people and those with type 2 diabetes. Eating tomatoes or tomato products is also

linked to reductions in blood pressure and inflammation. A large study also found that high consumption of lycopene from tomatoes was associated with a 65% reduction in stroke risk.

Purple and blue. These colors result from pigments called [anthocyanins](#) that may enhance brain health. Indeed, blueberries are often called "brain berries" because studies link them to reduced risk for age-related memory loss. For example, the [Nurses' Health Study reported](#) that women who ate the most blueberries and strawberries had slower rates of cognitive decline and [lower heart attack risk](#) than those who ate the least. [A Harvard study](#) also reports that resveratrol in red wine (as well as berries, grape skin, and peanuts) activates a protein that contributes to health and increased longevity in animals.

Green. Two [Harvard studies](#) of nearly 110,000 men and women found that people who ate 8 or more servings of fruits and veggies daily were 30% less likely to suffer a heart attack or stroke, compared to those who ate less than 1.5 servings. While all produce contributed to this benefit, the studies found that leafy green vegetables (such as spinach, Swiss chard, lettuce and mustard greens) and cruciferous vegetables (such as broccoli, cabbage and Brussels sprouts) were particularly beneficial for lowering risk for cardiovascular disease (CVD), the leading killer of Americans. People who eat a diet high in fiber (found in most fruits and vegetables) have a 56% to 59% lower risk of dying from CVD, infectious disease, or respiratory disorders, according to [a study](#) of nearly 400,000 people ages 50 and older.

Yellow and orange. The Harvard studies discussed above also found that citrus fruits, such as oranges, lemons and grapefruit, also make important contributions to reducing heart attack and stroke risk. These fruits contain citrus limonoids that have been shown to help fight cancers of the mouth, skin, lung, stomach, and colon in [lab tests](#) and may help lower cholesterol. Some yellow fruits, such as pineapples, contain [bromelain](#), a mixture of enzymes that have been used for centuries to treat indigestion and fight inflammation.

Crunchy Rainbow Veggie Wrap



Here's a tasty, nutritious recipe that is fun to make with your children. These wraps are ideal for healthy school lunches, a family picnic, or a healthy snack. For a gluten-free version, omit the tortillas and serve the colorful vegetables and hummus on top of black beans or brown rice, cooked according to the package instructions.

Ingredients

6 large whole-wheat tortillas
9 tablespoons humus
3 medium tomatoes, diced

2 carrots, peeled and shredded
2 yellow peppers, sliced into strips
2 cups shredded lettuce or spinach
4 red cabbage or radicchio leaves, shredded

Spread 1 and 1/2 tablespoons of hummus on each tortilla. Use the veggies to create a rainbow on each tortilla, leaving some room around the edges. Fold in sides of each tortilla, then roll it up tight. Cut wraps in half and then serve. Enjoy tasting the rainbow!

Adapted from the [U.S. Department of Agriculture website](#).