

Heart TALK

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

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Thoughts from Dr. Amy



Which Is Worse for Your Heart: Saturated Fat or Sugar?

For 50 years, saturated fat--found in meat, butter, cheese, and many baked goods and fried foods--has been demonized as the no. 1 dietary villain in cardiovascular disease (CVD). Yet decades of research show that sugar is actually even worse for the heart than saturated fat. In fact, a diet high in sugar triples risk for fatal CVD, according to a study published in *Progress in Cardiovascular Diseases* earlier this year. Excessive sugar intake also raises risk for diabetes, obesity, chronic inflammation and some forms of cancer.

The researchers reported that consuming a high-sugar diet for even a few weeks can trigger many abnormalities that boost risk for CVD, including elevated total cholesterol, triglycerides, and LDL (bad) cholesterol; insulin resistance; and low HDL (good) cholesterol. As the annual candy-fest known as Halloween approaches, here are heart-smart ways to slash sugar intake without feeling deprived. You'll also be delighted to learn that some tasty treats are actually good for your heart!

- **Ditch sweet drinks.** Consuming just one or two sugar-sweetened beverages daily--such as energy drinks, fruit drinks, soda, or coffee drinks--raises risk for a heart attack or dying from CVD by 35 percent, diabetes risk by

26 percent, and stroke risk by 16 percent, according to a 2015 Harvard study. Sweet drinks have been called "liquid candy" and rank as the top source of added sugar in the U.S. diet. Quench your thirst with plain or sparkling water flavored with a spritz of lemon or lime.

- **Be a food label detective.** About 75 percent of packaged foods contain added sugar, including many that you don't think of as sweet, such as tomato sauce, salad dressing, and many sauces and condiments. Watch out for sugar's various aliases on food labels, such as sucrose (table sugar), corn syrup, molasses, honey, fructose and almost any other ingredient that ends with "ose." A good rule is to avoid any food that lists sugar in any of its guises among the first 3 ingredients.
- **Nibble on dark chocolate.** Amazing, but true: Eating dark chocolate could save your life! A study of more than 19,000 people, published in *European Heart Journal*, found that those who ate an average of 7.5 grams of chocolate daily (one small square) had lower blood pressure and were 39 percent less likely to suffer a heart attack or stroke than those who averaged 1.7 grams or less daily. An even bigger study found eating small amounts of chocolate trimmed diabetes risk by 31 percent.
- **Satisfy your sweet tooth with fresh fruit.** Research shows that people whose diet is highest in fruit and vegetables have the lowest risk for stroke. Not only is fruit naturally sweet and packed with heart-healthy nutrients, but it's also an excellent choice for dessert. For example, try sprinkling baked apples with cinnamon--a spice that helps lower diabetes risk--or when you bake,

swap unsweetened applesauce for sugar in recipes (use an equal amount). Instead of adding sugar to oatmeal or cereal in the morning, try using bananas, cherries or blueberries.

- **Rethink your sports drink.** Fall is a wonderful time to exercise outdoors and enjoy the seasonal changes during your workout. However, many sports drinks are high in sugar or artificial sweeteners. In most situations, water is the best hydrator for sports activities. If you're sweating heavily or are concerned about electrolyte loss, adding a small amount of coconut water to your water bottle or eating fruit, such as a banana or orange, will give you ample electrolytes. As always, check with your medical provider to make sure the type of exercise you find enjoyable is appropriate for you. We recommend 22 minutes or more of physical activity daily to keep your heart healthy.
- **Track your sugar intake--and choose healthier foods.** Current government dietary guidelines advise limiting added sugars to less than 10 percent of your daily calories, citing "strong evidence" that low intake cuts risk for CVD. The best way to cut down on sugar is to swap processed foods (those that come in cans, bags or boxes) for natural ones, such as fresh produce, fish, whole grains, heart-healthy oils, and nuts. Reduce the temptation to reach for sugary snacks by keeping healthy munchies available, such as a few nuts, apple or pear slices, or carrot and celery sticks with hummus.

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The Surprising Link Between Autoimmune Diseases and Heart Attack Risk

Just about everyone has been shocked to hear about a fit, seemingly healthy person who died suddenly from a heart attack in his or her early 40s. Such tragedies are devastating for families who have lost a loved one--and scary for the person's friends and coworkers, who wonder how someone who appeared to be in perfect health could fall victim to a heart attack. Did the person's doctor miss something?

Unlike standard care, which checks patients for traditional CVD risk factors, such as high cholesterol, smoking or high blood pressure, the Bale Doneen Method also uses advanced lab tests and imaging to directly check each patient for hidden signs of arterial disease, which often causes no symptoms until it gets severe enough to spark a heart attack or stroke. While this comprehensive approach provides the most accurate risk assessment, a wide range of nontraditional "red flags," including having certain autoimmune diseases, may signal elevated risk for CV events. If you're one of the 23.5 million Americans who have autoimmune diseases, here's what you need to know to take optimal care of your heart health.

1. The effect of autoimmune diseases on heart risk depends on which disease you have.

For example, a recent study reported that people with lupus are up to 50 times more likely to have a heart attack than those without the disease, while other research reports that heart attack risk is doubled in those with Sjögren's syndrome. However, a systematic review that compared 156,108 people with various autoimmune diseases with 373,851 healthy people of the same age and gender found that overall, those with autoimmune conditions had a 20 percent rise in risk for developing CVD and/or type 2 diabetes. Of all the conditions the researchers studied, the one with the least cardiovascular impact was Crohn's disease (a bowel disorder), which hiked CVD and diabetes risk by 6 percent over an 11-year period.

2. Chronic inflammation is a key reason why autoimmune diseases are linked to higher risk for CVD and diabetes.

A family of more than 100 conditions, autoimmune diseases all work the same way: The body turns on itself because the immune system mistakes healthy cells, tissues or organs for foreign invaders, unleashing normally protective reactions, such as inflammation, that never end. In the systematic review, the highest risk for CVD and/or diabetes was found in autoimmune disease sufferers with the most severe inflammation.

3. Psoriasis is not just skin deep.

October 29 marks World Psoriasis Day, dedicated to raising awareness of an autoimmune disease that is often mistakenly thought to mainly be a cosmetic issue. Actually, younger patients with severe psoriasis have a 2.5 times higher risk of suffering a fatal heart attack or stroke than people of the same age and sex without the disease. What's more, people with severe psoriasis may suffer their first CV event by age 40. This suggests that even young people with psoriasis should consider getting a comprehensive Bale Doneen Method health assessment.

4. All heart attacks and strokes are potentially preventable.

While having an autoimmune disease can raise risk for developing CVD--the leading killer of American men and women--the good news is that there are a variety of effective, science-backed treatments that help you avoid CVD. If you already have it, therapies include personalized

lifestyle and dietary changes, oral wellness (since inflammation from gum disease can contribute to CV risk), medications and supplements. A new peer-reviewed study shows that the Bale Doneen Method is highly effective at rapidly shrinking and stabilizing arterial plaque in people with CVD, so it won't leap out and cause a heart attack or stroke.

Salmon with Pepita-Lime Sauce



Considered medicinal for more than 3,000 years, pepitas--also known as pumpkin seeds--have a remarkable array of health benefits. Packed with magnesium, calcium, potassium, iron, zinc, and vitamin K, these tasty treats are also rich in heart-healthy omega-3 fatty acids. Studies suggest that pepitas help lower cholesterol and blood pressure, reduce diabetes risk and have anti-inflammatory effects.

In this recipe, they're combined with lime juice and chili powder to give salmon (which is also high in omega-3) a savory Mexican twist. Serve with steamed, baked or roasted veggies or your favorite salad. The sauce is also delicious with other types of fish, grilled chicken or tofu.

Recipes *for the heart*

Ingredients

- 2 tablespoons unsalted pepitas**
- 1 tablespoon butter, softened**
- 1/2 teaspoon freshly grated lime zest**
- 3 tablespoons lime juice**
- 1/4 teaspoon chili powder**
- 1 pound salmon fillet, skinned and cut into 4 portions**
- 1/2 teaspoon salt (optional)**
- 1/4 teaspoon freshly ground pepper**

Toast pumpkin seeds and combine with butter, lime zest, lime juice and chili powder. Spray a large nonstick skillet with cooking spray and place over medium heat. Season salmon with salt and pepper and cook in heated pan until browned and the center is cooked, about 4 minutes per side.

Remove pan from heat, put salmon on a serving plate and add lime-butter mix to the hot pan. Stir until butter melts, then spoon sauce over the salmon. Serves four, with 185 calories, 24 grams of protein, 9 grams of fat and one gram of carbs per serving. Adapted from MillionHearts.gov.