

Heart TALK

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

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*Thoughts from
Dr. Amy*

WONDERFUL WAYS MINDFULNESS BENEFITS YOUR HEART, BRAIN AND ARTERIES

Did you know that chronic stress is a major risk for developing cardiovascular disease (CVD), the leading killer of Americans? A large study conducted in 52 countries around the world found that psychological factors (including stress) nearly tripled risk for a heart attack. Even newer research suggests that chronic tension is just as hazardous to your arterial health as smoking!

A recent study reveals why chronic stress is so toxic — and other new research offers a simple, but remarkably effective, way to tame tension: mindful meditation. Here's a look at the wonderful cardiovascular benefits of mindfulness and how to fit this relaxation technique into a hectic lifestyle, according to research presented in the [BaleDoneen Method Monthly Scientific Updates](#) for graduates of our [Preceptorship Course](#).



Your Brain and Arteries on Stress

An intriguing [2017 study](#) was the first to show that activity in the amygdala — a brain area involved in stress — independently predicted risk for cardiovascular events, even when a wide range of other factors affecting arterial health were taken into account. Activity in other brain areas was not predictive, reported the researchers.

The scientists used PET scans to study brain activity in 293 initially healthy people ages 30 and older. Participants were tracked for a median of 3.7 years, during which 22 of them suffered cardiovascular events, such as heart attacks, strokes, heart failure, and new-onset angina (chest pain due to due to inadequate blood flow to the heart).

The study found that activation of the amygdala due to fear and stress triggers a cascade of effects, including increased bone-marrow activity and a rise in arterial inflammation, one of the leading causes of CVD. The research suggests that stress reduction doesn't just make people feel better psychologically — it may also enhance arterial wellness, potentially protecting against heart attacks and strokes.

Powerful Health Benefits of Mindfulness

Mindfulness involves focusing on the present moment in an open, nonjudgmental way, while letting stressful thoughts about the past or future drift away. Many studies have reported health benefits from this practice, including the following:

- **Keeping your brain sharp throughout your life.** In the most extensive study to date, spanning 7 years, researchers report that meditation may help prevent age-related mental decline. Other studies suggest that mindfulness may actually change the brain, by expanding areas involved in focused attention.
- **Fighting inflammation and stress.** In a [small study](#), people who were highly stressed due to unemployment were randomly assigned to learn mindful meditation or a fake technique focused on relaxation. While both groups felt less stressed after three days, follow-up tests found that only those who practiced mindfulness had reductions in blood markers of inflammation. This group also had more communication in brain areas that process stress-related reactions and those related to focus and calm, suggesting that their brains may have undergone rewiring to manage tension more effectively.
- **Reducing chest pain and stress in heart patients.** Significant decreases in frequency and severity of angina in women with non-obstructive CVD were reported after 8 weeks of mindfulness training in a recent study. Mindfulness also reduced the women's scores on tests measuring depression, anxiety and perceived stress by 10% to 15%. No improvements in symptoms or mood were reported in a control group of patients who didn't get the training.

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7 HEART-SMART WEIGHT-LOSS TIPS THAT REALLY WORK



Nearly 40 percent of Americans — about 100 million people — are obese, according to a new study published in *Journal of the American Medical Association*. That’s alarming because obesity (defined as a body mass index, or BMI, of 30 or higher) greatly increases risk for cardiovascular disease (CVD), type 2 diabetes, several forms of cancer and many other chronic or life-threatening illnesses.

Another new study of nearly 300,000 people debunks the “obesity paradox” — the claim that people who are “fat but fit” don’t have to worry about heart attacks and strokes. The researchers found risk for developing CVD rises steadily as BMI increases — and also escalates in tandem with the amount of belly fat people have. Although “healthy obesity” is a myth, the good news is that even modest weight loss can boost your overall and arterial wellness. Use these 7 science-based tips from the Bale-Doneen Method to shed surplus pounds.

1. Keep a food diary

In a study of nearly 1,700 people, those who wrote down what they ate lost twice as much weight as those who didn’t keep a food diary. The researchers say that the simple act of recording what you eat encourages you to consume fewer calories and hold yourself accountable. We call it a “BLT journal” — write down every bite, lick and taste. Many people are surprised to discover how many hidden calories they take in (even while preparing meals)! There are several free apps that make it make it easy to keep a food diary even when you’re on the go. Some apps provide calorie counts for many brands of food and even menu items at popular restaurants.

2. Watch out for liquid calories

Fancy drinks, including coffees, alcoholic beverages, energy drinks and smoothies, are often calorie dense and high in concentrated carb/sugar content. Be aware! As [we reported recently](#), consuming even one or two sugar-sweetened beverages daily raises risk for a heart attack or dying from CVD by 35 percent, diabetes risk by 26 percent and stroke risk by 16 percent. To satisfy your sweet tooth, we suggest reaching for fresh fruit, such as [our rainbow-fruit kebabs with lemon-lime dip](#).

3. There is no panacea diet that works for everyone

A study comparing four popular low-carb or low-fat diets reported widely varying results, with some people losing 30 or more pounds on these diets over a 12-month period — and others gaining 10 pounds. What the researchers inadvertently proved was that the one-size-fits-all approach doesn’t work for weight loss. Similarly, studies of dietary approaches intended to lower heart attack

and stroke risk, such as the well-known Mediterranean diet, also reveal striking individual differences in response. That’s why the Bale-Doneen Method recommends [a diet based on your DNA](#), particularly your Apo E and Haptoglobin genotypes, which can be determined with simple blood or saliva testing. To learn more about our genetically guided diet-and-exercise plan and our approach to heart attack and stroke prevention, check out the BaleDoneen book, [Beat the Heart Attack Gene](#), available in hard cover, paperback, Kindle and audio editions at Amazon and other booksellers.

4. Move more!

Taking a walk before or after dinner is always a good idea. In a 12-week study, previously sedentary people who walked briskly for 30 minutes a day, five days a week, whittled their waistslines by about an inch, enjoyed a 6-point drop in systolic blood pressure (the top number) and reduced their hip measurement by about an inch. Another study found that brisk walking lowers total and LDL (bad) cholesterol by about 5%. Other research shows that walking briskly for three or more hours a week cuts risk for CVD by up to 50 percent. You’ll also get more exercise if you clip on a pedometer every morning: doing so motivated overweight people to walk an extra mile daily, a recent study found. They also lowered their blood pressure and lost more weight than a control group who didn’t count their steps. We advise getting at least 30 minutes of aerobic exercise daily, such as brisk walking, jogging or biking.

5. Stay hydrated

If you feel hungry — first grab a nice tall glass of water and drink it to see if that helps curb your appetite. We also recommend trying our [fruit-and-herb-infused water recipes](#)

for calorie-free refreshment. In a six-year study of more than 20,000 people, those who drank five or more glasses of water daily had half the risk for developing fatal heart disease than those who swigged two or fewer glasses daily, even when other risk factors were taken into account. In [a study of overweight women](#), those who drank 34 ounces of water a day lost five pounds over a 12-month period — even though they didn’t make any other lifestyle or dietary changes!

6. It is possible to overeat even the best exercise plan

Even a marathon runner needs to be respectful of quantity and quality of food intake. One of the best ways to get the heart-healthy nutrients you need without excessive calories is to fill at least half of your plate with fresh fruit and vegetables. Research shows that people whose diets are highest in fresh produce have the lowest risk for stroke. A large study of older adults also linked eating fiber-rich foods, such as produce, to longer life. As an alternative to takeout or restaurant meals at work, which can be high in fat and calories, consider bringing a healthy lunch to the office, such as our [Must-Have Kale Salad to Go](#).

7. Team up with a friend or group

Several studies show that people who are trying to slim down enjoy greater success when they have social support. Consider enlisting a few friends to be your “goal buddies” or joining a weight-loss support group as you strive to improve your diet and exercise more. Making lifestyle changes that lead to a healthier weight can be challenging, but with a support team to share tips and cheer each other on, it’s easier to stay motivated and even inspired during your journey toward an optimal weight — and optimal health.



Lemon Chicken with Thyme

• *April Recipe* •

Quick and easy to prepare, this zesty dish is low in calories but rich in flavor, with no oil or butter used. For a delicious variation, substitute rosemary or oregano for the thyme. The American Heart Association [recommends](#) chicken, fish and beans as good sources of lean protein because they're lower in saturated fat and cholesterol than red meat.

Citrus fruits are rich in disease-fighting antioxidants and have been shown to lower levels of LDL (bad) cholesterol and triglycerides. A [small study](#) also suggests that in the future, compounds found in these fruits may help prevent obesity-related heart disease and diabetes.

INGREDIENTS

- 4 skinless, boneless chicken breasts
- Juice of 2 lemons
- Zest of one lemon
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 tablespoon fresh thyme
- 1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 1/2 teaspoon salt (optional)
- 4 cups arugula or spinach leaves.

Preheat oven to 375 degrees Fahrenheit. In a small bowl, whisk together lemon juice, lemon zest, garlic, thyme, pepper and salt (if using). Place chicken breasts in baking pan and top with mixture. Bake for 40 minutes or until juices run clear. Arrange arugula or spinach leaves on serving platter, top with chicken breasts and pan juices, then enjoy!

SERVES FOUR

Adapted from eatyourselfskinny.com



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- **Lowering your blood pressure.** A [new 8-week Harvard study](#) found that people who meditated for 15 minutes a day had striking changes in expression of genes that regulate inflammation, circadian rhythms and glucose metabolism, leading to significant drops in their blood pressure.
- **Combatting or preventing depression.** In an 8-week study published in [Annals of Family Medicine](#), adults with subclinical depression were randomly assigned to either receive standard medical care or mindfulness training. After 12 months, those who practiced mindfulness had a much lower rate of major depression than those who received standard care (10.8%

versus 26.8%). That is an important CV benefit since major depression escalates risk for arterial disease.

Easy Mindful Exercises

To tame tension and enjoy the cardiovascular benefits of mindfulness, try these quick exercises during the day

- **Start with a basic meditation.** Sit quietly for 10 minutes and pay attention to your breathing or a mantra (focus word) that you repeat silently as you allow distracting thoughts or worries to drift away like wisps of smoke. You may find it helpful to gaze at a meditation object, such as a smooth stone.
- **Create a "to-be" list.** Kim Nicol, a mindfulness expert who works with Fortune 500 executives, offers this advice [in](#)

[a recent Fast Company article](#): "Halfway through the day, pause and take a minute to ask, 'How am I being right now?' Curt, or understanding? Defensive, or open-minded?" She adds, "You might even find you're engaging others and forming deeper relationships by being curious and intentional." Writing down your "to-be" list helps you turn your intentions into achievable goals.

- **Give yourself some credit.** "You are your own worst critic, so allowing time for gratitude can be difficult amid a jam-packed schedule ... but it should be a priority," Nicol tells her students. She advises listing your accomplishments every day, even the little things, such as not hitting the snooze button for once, to keep your focus in a positive place.