

Heart TALK

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

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*Thoughts from
Dr. Amy*

7 Wonderful Health Perks of Outdoor Exercise



Exercise has such powerful mental and physical benefits that it's been called "the ultimate wonder drug." Moving your workout outdoors can dramatically increase these beneficial effects: 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.

To keep your heart healthy, the American Heart Association and the BaleDoneen Method recommend a minimum of 150 minutes of moderate physical activity a week, such as walking, jogging, biking, or swimming. Always check with your medical provider before starting a new workout to make sure it's right for you — and be sure to slather on some sunscreen and stay hydrated during outdoor exercise. Here's a look at seven 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, horseback 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, compared to 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

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Moderate Drinking: Good or Bad for Your Heart Health?

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) has canceled a \$100 million study of the cardiovascular effects of drinking moderate amounts of alcohol amid concerns about industry funding and influence that might lead to a pro-alcohol bias.

The study was supposed to compare rates of heart attacks, strokes and other cardiovascular events in 8,000 volunteers who would be randomly assigned to either consume one alcoholic drink a day or abstain completely for a ten-year period.

Does a drink a day help keep the cardiologist away — or is there a cardiovascular downside to moderate drinking? One of the trial’s “serious shortcomings,” according to the NIH, was that it would not compare rates of heart failure in the two groups, a well-known risk of alcohol use. Conversely, wine consumption is often offered as the explanation for the so-called “French paradox,” the relatively low rate of cardiovascular disease in France despite a diet high in butter and cheese. Here’s a look at science-based findings about the effects of alcohol and key takeaways from the BaleDoneen Method.



What counts as moderate drinking?

The USDA’s dietary guidelines for Americans define moderate drinking as a maximum of two alcoholic beverages a day for men and one for women. A drink consists of 12 ounces of beer, 5 ounces of wine or 1 1/2 ounces of spirits, such as vodka, whiskey or gin. According to [the CDC](#), more than two-thirds of Americans report exceeding this amount at least once a month.

What are the potential health benefits of moderate drinking?

Over the years, many prospective studies have reported an association between moderate alcohol intake and a 25-40% lower risk for cardiovascular disease (CVD). Some researchers have also reported reduced risk for heart attack, stroke, type 2 diabetes and high blood pressure, and improvements in levels of HDL (good) cholesterol and insulin sensitivity. However, prospective studies are not designed to show a cause-and-effect relationship, so do not prove that alcohol is responsible for these effects, which could only be done with a randomized clinical trial.

Recent research suggests other possible explanations for the link between light drinking and reduced cardiovascular risk. For example, the CDC reports that moderate drinkers are more likely to maintain a healthy weight, exercise regularly and average the seven to eight hours of sleep a night that is optimal for heart health, compared to nondrinkers or heavy drinkers. After adjustment for possible confounding factors, including lifestyle, [a 2015 study published in British Medical Journal](#) reported that moderate alcohol intake had little or no cardiovascular protective effect for most people. The researchers analyzed health data from nearly 20,000 men and women who were tracked for about ten years.

What are the potential risks of moderate drinking?

Alcohol consumption has a wide range of short- and long-term risks that increase with the amount you drink, including high blood pressure, various cancers, injuries and car crashes. In a 2017 study, quaffing more than one drink a day significantly increased risk for atrial fibrillation, a dangerous type of irregular heart rhythm that is a major risk factor for stroke. For some conditions, including breast cancer and liver disease, there is no safe level of drinking, the CDC cautions.

A new study of nearly 600,000 people across 19 countries, published in [The Lancet](#) in April, mirrored earlier research by linking heavy drinking to a shorter life. The researchers found that having ten or more drinks a week shortened life expectancy by one to two years for the average 40-year-old, compared to someone who drank less than one alcoholic beverage daily, while downing 18 or more drinks weekly lowered life expectancy by up to five years.

The study linked consuming more than five drinks per week to increased risk for heart failure, stroke, fatal abdominal aortic aneurysms (a weak, ballooning area in the heart’s largest artery), and deaths from high blood pressure. “The key message of this research is that, if you already drink alcohol, drinking less may help you live longer and lower your risk of several cardiovascular conditions,” said Angela Wood from the University of Cambridge, lead author of the study.

Heavy drinking (defined as eight or more drinks a week for women and 15 or more for men) has many dangers, including tripling risk for dementia and elevating it for CVD, many cancers, and other chronic conditions. The effects of moderate alcohol intake are more complex and controversial. Although numerous studies have linked moderate drinking to reduced risk for heart attack and ischemic stroke, there is growing skepticism about its purported protective CV effect on the heart or brain. A study of nearly 2 million people,

published in *British Medical Journal* in 2017, reported that compared to not drinking, moderate alcohol consumption raised risk for cardiovascular diseases as follows:

- Fatal coronary artery disease, 56%
- Heart attack, 32%
- Abdominal aortic aneurysm, 32%
- Heart failure, 24%
- Peripheral artery disease, 22%
- Ischemic stroke, 12%

What’s the BaleDoneen Method takeaway?

If you don’t currently drink alcohol, the CDC and the BaleDoneen Method recommend against starting. As we recently reported, following an optimal lifestyle [can reduce your risk for heart attack and stroke by up to 90%](#), even if it doesn’t include alcohol, and simply increasing the amount of exercise you get [lowers cardiovascular risk by 50%](#), even if you are one among the 50% of Americans who carry genes that magnify the threat of a heart attack or stroke, such as the 9P21 “heart attack” gene.

If you do imbibe moderately, we advise discussing the potential risks and benefits with your healthcare provider. It’s also helpful to take your genetics into account. For example, research suggests [that a diet based on your DNA](#) can help optimize arterial wellness. About 25% of Americans carry genes that make limiting or avoiding alcohol and a very low-fat diet their best bet, while 64% of Americans have genotypes that thrive on the Mediterranean diet, which emphasizes plant-based foods, such as fresh fruits and vegetables, nuts, whole grains, legumes, olive oil, nuts and moderate amounts of yogurt, cheese and wine. A similar diet that is slightly higher in fat from heart-healthy sources — such as nuts, Omega-3 rich fish and olive oil — is advised for the other 11% of the population. For more news on heart health, please visit the [BaleDoneen blog](#).

Tomato, Cucumber and Mint Gazpacho



• July Recipe •

Cool, refreshing and easy to make, this tasty summer soup is packed with heart-healthy nutrients. Tomatoes contain the antioxidant lycopene, which has been linked to reduced risk for cardiovascular disease, diabetes, high blood pressure and some forms of cancer. Cucumbers are an ideal food to stay hydrated on hot days since they are 95 percent water. They also contain compounds that support brain health and help fight inflammation. Not only does mint freshen your breath, but it also boosts oral health by combating harmful bacteria inside the mouth.

INGREDIENTS

- 1 1/2 pounds ripe tomatoes, quartered
- 4 Persian (baby) cucumbers, peeled and diced, divided
- 1/2 cup fresh mint leaves, silvered
- 2 tablespoons fresh chives, chopped, plus additional for garnish
- 1 garlic clove
- 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 2 tablespoon red wine or sherry vinegar
- 1/2 teaspoon salt (optional)
- Ground black pepper to taste

PREPARATION

Coarsely puree tomatoes in a blender, leaving a little texture but no large pieces. Transfer to large mixing bowl and stir in all remaining ingredients, reserving a small amount of diced cucumber for garnish. Chill for two or more hours, serve garnished with the reserved diced cucumber and chopped chives, and enjoy! Serves four to six.

Adapted from Yummybeet.com and Cooking.nytimes.com.



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kids who didn't see the video. Outdoor sports and play also help protect children from developing diabetes, heart disease, and even nearsightedness, and cut 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 well-being, 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 been identified as a risk factor for developing heart disease.

6. A more vigorous workout

Whether you are jogging on the beach, hiking on a mountain trail,

or biking through a beautiful nature preserve, your body is constantly adapting to a changing environment, which can increase the intensity of your workout, according to [the American Council on Exercise](#) (ACE). The organization also reports that natural resistance from the wind can help you burn more calories.

7. 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 ACE. That's a wonderful reason to plug in your headphones, go outdoors, and start putting more spring into your step!