

Heart TALK

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

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*Thoughts from
Dr. Amy*

Why Are Heart Attacks and Strokes on the Rise in Young Adults?

After Luke Perry's death from a massive stroke at age 52, many people asked how this could have happened. Wasn't the "Beverly Hills, 90210" star too young for a stroke? And could this tragedy have been prevented? Perry joins a growing list of celebrities who have fallen victim to heart attacks or strokes before age 55, including Sharon Stone, Rosie O'Donnell, John Mellencamp and Bob Harper.

Rates of cardiovascular events are soaring in younger adults, particularly among women. In a study of more than 28,000 people hospitalized for heart attacks between 1995 and 2014, a whopping 30% (8,737 patients) were between the ages of 35 and 54. Another recent study found that between 2003 and 2012, stroke rates rose by 43% among 45- to 54-year-olds, and by 36% in the 18-to-34 age group. What's behind this alarming trend? Here's a look at how to protect your arterial health at every age with the BaleDoneen Method.

ARE YOU AT RISK FOR A HEART ATTACK OR STROKE?

In a new study of more than 1.4 million young adults who were hospitalized for a heart attack, 92% had at least one of the following modifiable risk factors: high blood pressure, smoking, obesity, diabetes and high cholesterol. The research was published in *Journal of the American College of Cardiology (JACC)* in February.

Having even one of these risk factors also magnifies the threat



of having a stroke at an early age, according to [a study of stroke survivors ages 49 and under](#) presented at the American Stroke Association's International Stroke Conference in February. People in their 30s or 40s with at least two of these risks were ten times more likely to suffer a stroke than those with none.

The findings suggest that medical providers need to do a better job of screening younger patients for stroke risk, said Dr. Sharon Poisson, the study's lead author. "People in their 20s and 30s aren't typically thinking that high blood pressure or diabetes are things they need to worry about, yet they really do make an impact on stroke risk," she told USNews.com.

WHEN SHOULD YOU START SCREENING FOR CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASE?

Yet many young people don't know they are at risk until a heart attack or stroke occurs. [In a 2015 study of young heart attack survivors ages 18 to 55](#), almost all of them had at least one of the

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The Sweet Truth about Fresh Fruit, Fructose and Heart Health

One of the most common dietary recommendations for better heart health is to eat more fruit and vegetables. Although many large studies have found that a diet high in fresh produce lowers risk for heart attacks, strokes, high blood pressure and other cardiovascular diseases, patients often wonder if they should be concerned about a sugar in fruit: fructose.

Fueling this worry is research linking excessive consumption of fructose to weight gain, fatty liver disease, chronic inflammation, and insulin resistance (the root cause of 70% of heart attacks and almost all cases of type 2 diabetes). What's more, a high-sugar diet raises risk for some forms of cancer and triples it for fatal cardiovascular disease (CVD)! Does that mean sugar in fruit is bad for you? Here's the scoop on fructose

FRUCTOSE — HEALTHY OR HARMFUL?

Here's the wonderful news: Eating fresh fruit is good for your heart! Although it does contain fructose and other natural forms of sugar, fruit is also high in heart-healthy fiber and a rich array of micronutrients, including minerals, vitamins and phytochemicals, such as disease-fighting antioxidants.

Although people on diets often worry that fruit is fattening, in reality, whole fresh fruit is nutrient dense, meaning that it's filling but relatively low in calories. For example, a medium apple has 95 calories, and a banana has 105. A recent paper in the journal *Nutrients* reported that despite sugar content, numerous studies have shown that most types of fruit have anti-obesity effects — and many health organizations actually recommend that dieters eat fruit. The one exception is fruit juice, which has linked to weight gain, especially in children.

Conversely, an artificial form of fructose called high-fructose corn syrup (HFCS) that's widely used as a sweetener is indeed harmful to health, adding empty calories that are the leading culprit in America's obesity epidemic. In the 1800s, the average American ate two pounds of sugar a year, versus a whopping 152 pounds a year today, according to the [National Institutes of Health](#). That works out to three pounds of sugar a week, most of which are consumed in soft drinks. One can of HFCS-sweetened soda contains about 11 teaspoons of sugar, while delivering zero nutritional value.

As [we recently reported](#), consuming even one or two sugar-sweetened beverages a day boosts risk for fatal CVD by 35 percent, diabetes risk by 26 percent and stroke risk by 16 percent. HFCS has also been implicated as a driver of chronic inflammation, the fire in the arteries that leads to heart attacks and strokes. For tips more information about sugar's effects on arterial health, check out our [blog post on kicking the sugar habit](#).

WHAT ARE THE CARDIOVASCULAR BENEFITS OF FRESH FRUIT?

In a [study of more than 500,000 people](#), published in *New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM)*, researchers analyzed the effects of daily intake of fresh fruit on heart health. Initially healthy participants who were ages 30 to 79 at the start of the study were tracked for about ten years, with measurements of their weight, blood pressure, blood sugar and rates of fatal and nonfatal heart disease and stroke. The investigators also recorded how often the volunteers ate fresh fruit: daily, one to three times a week, four to six times a week or never, with the following findings:



THE MORE OFTEN PEOPLE ATE FRESH FRUIT, THE LOWER THEIR RATE OF CORONARY ARTERY DISEASE (CAD).

Those who ate fresh fruit daily had a 34% lower rate of CAD (plaque in the arteries that can lead to heart attack or stroke) than those who consumed fruit less often, while people who ate fruit one to three days a week had a 23% lower risk. Even eating fresh fruit at least once a month was linked to a 17% risk reduction.

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Healthy Gluten-free Blueberry Crumble

• *March Recipe*



Rich in disease-fighting antioxidants and micronutrients, blueberries have so many health benefits, including lowering risk for dementia, that some people call them “brain berries.” In a recent study, British researchers reported that people who ate a cup of blueberries daily had a 20% reduction in heart disease risk and also lowered their blood pressure. Here is a delicious gluten-free, vegan recipe for blueberry crisp that is sure to become a family favorite.

INGREDIENTS

Cooking spray
One cup of gluten-free rolled oats
¼ cup of pecans, chopped
1 teaspoon cinnamon
½ teaspoon ginger
¼ teaspoon nutmeg
1½ tablespoons coconut oil
1 tablespoon maple syrup or agave
6 cups frozen blueberries
3 tablespoons cornstarch

PREPARATION

Preheat oven to 350°F and coat an 8” square pan with nonstick cooking spray. In a small bowl, prepare topping by whisking together oats, pecans, spices, coconut oil and maple syrup or agave. In a large bowl, toss blueberries with cornstarch until well coated, then pour berries into prepared pan. Sprinkle topping evenly over the berries. Bake for 40-45 minutes or until juice bubbles at the sides of the pan and the topping is crisp and golden brown. Cool and enjoy! Serves four.

Adapted from the
cleaneatingcouple.com and amyshealthybaking.com.

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EATING FRESH FRUIT DAILY LOWERS SYSTOLIC BLOOD PRESSURE.

High blood pressure affects nearly half of American adults, according to new guidelines from the American Heart Association and American College of Cardiology. Often called a “silent killer,” high blood pressure is the leading risk factor for stroke and a major contributor to heart disease. Recent studies have shown that elevated systolic blood pressure is more dangerous than smoking or obesity.



FRESH FRUIT HELPS PREVENT STROKE.

The NEJM reported that people who ate fresh fruit every day had a 25% lower rate of ischemic stroke (the most common type of stroke) and a 36% lower risk for hemorrhagic stroke. An [earlier analysis of studies involving more than 760,000 people](#) found that for each additional serving of fruit people ate daily, their risk for stroke dropped by 32%. Eating one additional serving of vegetables was linked to an 11% risk reduction.



EATING FRESH FRUIT HELPS SAVE LIVES AND HEARTS!

Compared to people who didn’t eat fresh fruit, those who consumed it daily were 40% less likely to die from heart disease, the NEJM study found. Fruits that are particularly good for your heart include apples and tomatoes, both of which help lower cholesterol; blueberries, which reduce blood pressure; and citrus fruits, which were shown in a recent Harvard study to help lower heart attack and stroke risk. For more dietary guidance on how to optimize your arterial wellness, check out our blog post about [“eating the rainbow.”](#)

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risk factors listed above. Yet only 53% knew they were at risk before the event, and even fewer had ever discussed their risks or how to reduce them with their medical provider.

The study of young heart attack survivors also found that women were 11% less likely to be informed of their cardiac danger and 16% less likely to be counseled on risk factor modification, such as lifestyle changes, than men of the same age. An accompanying editorial stated that, “the rising epidemic of [cardiovascular disease] in younger women may be attributable in part to a lack of risk assessment and preventive therapy.”

As we recently reported, part of the problem is that most patients — and some medical providers — don’t know the right age to start screening for cardiovascular disease (CVD), the leading killer of men and women. In [a recent national survey](#), 92% of

patients thought, on average, that screening should start at age 41. Actually, the American Heart Association recommends that screening for cardiac risk start at age 20.

THE BEST TESTS TO SCREEN FOR HIDDEN CARDIOVASCULAR DANGER

CVD, which claims more American lives each year than all forms of cancer combined, can start to develop when people are in their teens or early 20s. If undetected and untreated, it can silently progress until it becomes severe enough to cause a heart attack or stroke.

Since heart attacks and strokes can occur in seemingly healthy people with few — or none — of the traditional risk factors, the BaleDoneen Method uses laboratory and imaging tests to directly check each patient for signs of hidden arterial disease.

Here are some of the best ways for young people to find out if they are at risk for a heart attack or stroke:

- **BLOOD PRESSURE.** Nearly 50% of Americans have elevated blood pressure, the leading risk factor for stroke, according to new guidelines from the [American Heart Association](#).
- **CHOLESTEROL.** Most patients assume that the standard cholesterol test checks for all forms of dangerous cholesterol that raise heart attack and stroke risk. Actually, most healthcare providers don’t test for a common inherited cholesterol disorder: elevated levels of lipoprotein (a), a blood fat that triples risk for heart attacks. This disorder, which can be detected with [a \\$20 blood test](#), turned out to be the culprit in celebrity fitness trainer Bob Harper’s near-fatal heart attack at age 51.
- **BLOOD SUGAR.** It’s very common for people to be diagnosed with diabetes or insulin resistance (IR, a pre-diabetic condition) shortly after they have a heart attack. While these disorders may sound unrelated, IR is the root cause of about 70% of heart attacks. BaleDoneen and other studies show that the most accurate screening test for IR is the two-hour oral glucose tolerance test.
- **WAIST MEASUREMENT.** A waistline measuring more than 35 inches for a woman or more than 40 inches for a man is one of the leading indicators of [metabolic syndrome](#) (a dangerous cluster of risk factors that triples risk for heart attack and quintuples it for type 2 diabetes).
- **CAROTID INTIMA THICKNESS (CIMT).** This 15-min-

ute, FDA-approved test uses ultrasound to measure the lining of the largest artery of your neck — and can also detect arterial plaque (disease). In [a recent study of 3,067 “healthy” adults under age 45](#) who were tracked for 16 years, CIMT measurements were shown to strongly predict risk for heart attack and stroke, independent of the person’s risk factors.

- **ORAL HEALTH.** A [landmark BaleDoneen study](#) was the first to identify bacteria from periodontal (gum) disease as a contributing cause of CVD. That means your dental provider is a potentially lifesaving member of your heart attack and stroke prevention team. To find out if you have high-risk oral bacteria, the BaleDoneen Method recommends using available tests from companies that measure oral pathogens through DNA analysis, including OralDNA, OraVital and Hain Diagnostics. About 50% of Americans ages 30 and older have gum disease, which has [been linked to increased risk for CVD, Alzheimer’s disease, and several forms of cancer](#).
- **GENETIC TESTING.** As discussed more fully in the BaleDoneen book, [Beat the Heart Attack Gene](#), about 50% of Americans carry genetic variants that greatly increase their risk for heart attacks and strokes at an early age. For more than a decade, the [BaleDoneen Method](#) has used a genetically guided precision-medicine approach, which has been shown in [two recent peer-reviewed studies](#) to effectively prevent, detect, treat and even reverse arterial disease, even in those with genetic risk.



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