Heart disease kills more Americans than all cancers combined. Here’s how healers beat the odds in their own lives.

40 THINGS CARDIOLOGISTS AND OTHER DOCTORS DO TO PROTECT THEIR HEARTS

BY CHARLOTTE HILTON ANDERSEN

1. I eat eggs.
   “The science shows that a diet without cholesterol does not necessarily lower a person’s cholesterol. In fact, when the cholesterol in a food is high, it is often acting as an antioxidant. Eggs are a great food, full of satiating protein and essential fats.”

   CAROLYN DEAN, MD, ND,
   author of Atrial Fibrillation: Remineralize Your Heart

2. I get eight hours of sleep a night.
   “Poor sleep is linked to higher blood pressure, a risk factor for heart disease. I try to get to bed by 10 p.m. I don’t watch television right before bed, and I keep my room dark. I also never drink caffeine after 10 a.m., and I avoid alcohol on work nights.”

   JENNIFER HAYTHE, MD, cardiologist and assistant professor of medicine at Columbia University Medical Center

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MARK ALLEN MILLER
3 I take the stairs.

"It is no surprise that the number of heart attacks has increased in our modern age, thanks in no small part to modern conveniences such as elevators and escalators, which reduce the amount of exercise we get on a daily basis. To counteract this, I take the stairs at every opportunity."

RICHARD WRIGHT, MD, cardiologist and chairman of the Pacific Heart Institute at Providence Saint John's Health Center

4 I meditate.

"Stress can cause catecholamine release—also known as the fight-or-flight response—and that can lead to heart failure and heart attacks. I have found a great sense of comfort in 20 minutes of meditation daily. It gives me the reset I need when pressure is rising."

ARCHANA SAXENA, MD, cardiologist at NYU Lutheran Medical Center

5 I use a meal-delivery service.

"I often miss meals and end up grabbing junk food during the day. A meal-delivery service helps guarantee that I will have healthy meals and snacks."

NICOLE WEINBERG, MD, cardiologist at Providence Saint John's Health Center

6 I do CrossFit.

"Exercise blunts the 'cortisol spike,' the rush of stress hormones that has been linked to increased risk of a heart attack or a stroke. CrossFit is my favorite."

ADAM SPLAYER, MD, cardiologist and cofounder of NanoHealth Associates

7 I take a personalized multivitamin.

"A 2015 study in the Journal of Nutrition showed that women who took a multivitamin for more than three years significantly reduced their risk of heart disease. Even though I try to eat a well-balanced Mediterranean diet, I know there are certain nutrients on which I fall short. I take a multivitamin tailored to my specific needs based on my
answers to questions about my diet, lifestyle, and health concerns as well as health markers. I even created my own company to help others find which vitamins work best for their needs."

ARIELLE LEVITAN, MD, cofounder of Vous Vitamin LLC, a company that creates personalized vitamins, and coauthor of The Vitamin Solution: Two Doctors Clear the Confusion About Vitamins and Your Health

I'm always finding something to laugh about.

"Seeing the humor in everyday situations helps me maintain perspective. Laughing dilates the arteries and keeps blood pressure down."

SUZANNE STEINBAUM, MD, cardiologist and spokesperson for the American Heart Association's Go Red for Women movement

I take care of my teeth.

"Good oral hygiene can lead to less systemic inflammation in the short term. While more research is needed to determine whether this decreases heart attacks or strokes—the link has been debated for decades—having a healthy mouth is important to overall wellness."

JULIE CLARY, MD, cardiologist at Indiana University Health

I eat berries.

"Berries have natural antioxidants, such as vitamins C and E, and anthocyanins, the pigments that give berries their color, both of which help the heart. The Kuopio Ischemic Heart Disease Risk Factor Study showed significantly lower cardiac deaths in men who ate 400 grams, or about three cups, of berries per day. The Iowa Women's Health Study of 35,000 women showed significant reduction in cardiac mortality with strawberry intake over 16 years. So I eat fresh or frozen berries regularly."

NITIN KUMAR, MD, gastroenterologist and expert in cardiometabolic risk at the Bariatric Endoscopy Institute

I get the flu vaccine every year.

"Getting a flu vaccination is especially good for people with heart disease and heart failure. The vaccine has recently been shown to offer protection against new-onset atrial fibrillation (irregular heart rhythm)."

JASON GUCHARD, MD, cardiologist in Birmingham, Alabama
I respect the power of blood pressure.

"In 2015, we did a study that found that lowering systolic blood pressure (the top number) to 120 mm Hg reduced rates of death due to cardiovascular disease, heart failure, stroke, and heart attack by 25 percent. It’s important to keep it in check by eating a healthy diet, being physically active, and maintaining a healthy weight.”

NICOLE WEINBERG, MD

I choose my cooking oils carefully.

“There has been a lot of research recently into how different oils affect our heart health, and it goes far beyond olive oil. I avoid products with palm oil and look instead for those with canola oil. Coconut, avocado, and almond oils are also good choices.”

CORA E. LEWIS, MD, epidemiologist and professor at University of Alabama at Birmingham School of Medicine

I eat lots of protein.

"Since the heart is a muscle, it needs daily lean proteins. I eat grass-fed meat and wild-caught fish along with heart-healthy olive oil, nuts, and vegetables. And I make sure to avoid meat that contains antibiotics or hormones.”

AL SEARS, MD, antiaging specialist and author of 15 books on health and wellness

I make time for my loved ones.

"Heart disease has been associated with job strain and psychological distress at any point in life—both things that good friends and family can help with.”

JONATHAN ELION, MD, FACC, cardiologist and associate professor of medicine at Brown University

I have my hormones tested.

"Higher hormone levels in women, particularly estrogen, can affect how blood vessels stretch and contract, which can make them more vulnerable to arterial tears and blood clots. The risk of heart problems is slightly higher for women who are on hormonal birth control, undergoing hormone replacement therapy, or pregnant. Ask your doctor about alternate methods of birth control or hormone therapy. Another way to keep estrogen levels within the heart-healthy range is to maintain a healthy weight.”

AL SEARS, MD, antiaging specialist and author of 15 books on health and wellness

I’m on alert for high blood sugar.

"In adults with diabetes, the most common causes of death are heart disease and stroke, according to the National Institutes of Health. I avoid junk food, particularly soda, and other foods that lead to high blood sugar and insulin resistance, the precursors to diabetes.”

RICHARD WRIGHT, MD
18 I spend time outdoors.
"Recently I realized I had been indoors too long, so I 'prescribed' myself a hike! This nature hack relieves stress and allows me to get vitamin D from the sunshine."
Monya De, MD, MPH, Internal medicine physician in Los Angeles

19 I do intense aerobics.
"Frequent, intense, prolonged cardiovascular exercise lowers blood pressure, increases good cholesterol (HDL), reduces bad cholesterol (LDL) and triglycerides, and stabilizes blood sugar. I try to do a 45-minute session nearly every day in which I burn about 750 calories."
Paul B. Langevin, MD, associate professor in the department of anesthesiology and perioperative medicine at Drexel University College of Medicine

20 I eat a Mediterranean diet.
"Instead of grabbing chips when I get home hungry at the end of the day, I slice up half an avocado and drizzle on some olive oil. Delicious and filling, this quick snack is part of a Mediterranean diet, which has been scientifically proven to be heart healthy."
Glenn Rich, MD, an internist specializing in endocrinology, obesity, and weight management in Trumbull, Connecticut
21 I take a vitamin K2 supplement.
"Recent studies indicate that vitamin K2 is critical to heart health. It works by shuttling calcium into your bones instead of letting the calcium clog your arteries. There are also studies that indicate vitamin K2 may reverse coronary calcification, the disease that causes blockage of your arteries."

ADAM SPLAYER, MD

22 I recommend lots of lovemaking.
"Sex is like interval exercise, which is very good for the heart. One easy and fun way to help your heart is to have more sex!"

RICHARD WRIGHT, MD

23 I ask for a heart scan.
"Obtaining a screening test called a coronary calcium CAT scan enabled me to determine whether I was developing early heart disease. This test is simple, widely available, and relatively cheap (insurance may cover it, but it's still quite affordable—between $100 and $400—without it). It can find signs of heart disease before you even feel the symptoms."

GLENN RICH, MD

24 I skip the hot dogs.
"According to a Harvard University analysis, there is strong evidence for association between the consumption of processed red meats, such as sausage, hot dogs, and lunch

25 I lost weight.
"About ten years ago, I found myself 40 pounds overweight. I also had not been to a doctor for many years at that time. I made an appointment to see my doctor but not until I went on a diet, joined a gym, and over a year lost the 40 pounds. A 2016 study found that being overweight could take one to three years off your life, while being obese may take as many as eight—and the effect is three times worse for men than for women."

MARK GREENBERG, MD, director of the White Plains Hospital Cardiology Lab and medical director of interventional cardiology at Montefiore Health System
meat, and an increased risk of cardiovascular disease and early death."

MICHAEL FENSTER, MD, interventional cardiologist, chef, and author of The Fallacy of the Calorie: Why the Modern Western Diet Is Killing Us and How to Stop It

26 I try to schedule exercise.
"I often hear my patients say they don’t have time to exercise or say they had no idea that they had gained weight. This is why I schedule my exercise sessions just as I would schedule a business meeting or any other event."

STEVEN TABAK, MD, FACC, medical director for quality and physician outreach at Cedars-Sinai Heart Institute

27 I eat dairy instead of taking calcium supplements.
"Many Americans buy vitamin and mineral supplements when their money could be better spent purchasing high-quality foods. We recently conducted a study that found that taking calcium in the form of supplements may raise the risk of plaque buildup in arteries and heart damage. But the good news is that a diet high in calcium-rich foods may be protective."

ERIN MICHOS, MD, MHS, associate director of preventive cardiology and associate professor of medicine at the Ciccarone Center for the Prevention of Heart Disease at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine

28 I got tested for sleep disorders.
"Sleep apnea, one of the most common sleep disorders, causes you to take long pauses in breathing during sleep. This can starve your organs of oxygen and wreak havoc on your heart health, potentially causing heart attacks, arrhythmias, heart failure, strokes, and high blood pressure."

ADAM SPLAVER, MD

29 I take probiotics.
"Certain kinds of probiotics, such as Lactobacillus acidophilus and Bifidobacterium lactis, have been shown to significantly decrease bad cholesterol and inflammatory markers that may lead to heart disease."

NICOLE VAN GRONINGEN, MD, internal medicine physician at UCSF Medical Center

30 I drink alcohol in moderation.
"Moderate drinking (one to two servings a day) can offer protection from heart disease. But if you do not drink at all, keep it that way. If you drink more than one or two drinks in a single occasion, it can increase your risk of a stroke."

SAMUEL MALLOY, MD, medical director at dsfelix.co.uk, an online doctor and pharmacist

31 I make sure to get plenty of vitamin D.
"Studies have shown that having low vitamin D levels is a significant..."
predictor of cardiac death, heart attack, and stroke. Low vitamin D is also associated with high blood pressure and blood sugar, which are risk factors for heart disease. Have your doctor check your vitamin D level and supplement up to normal with high doses if needed.  

NITIN KUMAR, MD

I tried a vegetarian diet.  
“Last year, our cardiology group started an Ornish Reversal Intensive Cardiac Rehab, a specialized program developed for cardiac patients to help prevent future problems. The outcomes for our patients have been dramatic. So we doctors decided to ‘walk the walk’ and follow the program ourselves. One part of the program is eating a vegetarian diet for three months. I was surprised at how much better I felt. I explored exciting and delicious new foods and felt less bloated and tired after meals.”  

JOSEPH A. CRAFT III, MD, FACC, cardiologist at the Heart Health Center in St. Louis

I practice gratitude.  
“One study showed that volunteers who were asked to focus on feelings of deep appreciation had increased heart-rate variability (HRV); high HRV is associated with decreased death from cardiac disease. Another study found that patients who kept gratitude journals for two months had lower levels of inflammatory biomarkers that could lead to cardiovascular disease. It has become clear to me that gratitude isn’t just good for the soul; it’s good for the body too.”  

NICOLE VAN GRONINGEN, MD

I mix magnesium powder into my water.  
“If sufficient magnesium is present in the body, cholesterol will not be produced in excess. So I supplement with magnesium citrate powder, an absorbable form of magnesium. Mixed with water, it can be easily sipped throughout the day.”  

CAROLYN DEAN, MD, ND

I recommend aspirin, but only for some people.  
“Contrary to popular belief, the heart itself is not improved with aspirin treatment. If you’re healthy, there is no preventative benefit in taking aspirin. But for people who have already experienced a heart event or those with diseased arteries, a low-dose aspirin a day is very helpful at preventing a future heart attack.”  

RICHARD WRIGHT, MD

I take an herbal sleep aid.  
“Believe it or not, the average person gets up to two fewer hours of sleep per night than people did 100 years ago. This decrease in sleep has been linked with an increased risk of heart disease. Unfortunately, insomnia has also increased. So I recommend small doses of melatonin and 5-HTP..."
supplements, which have been very effective in helping me get to sleep and sleep through the night."

WESTIN CHILDS, DO,
an internist practicing
in Gilbert, Arizona

38 I eat a “no-white” diet.
“Instead of avoiding fat, I stay away from the ‘whites’: white sugar, white flour, white bread, and white rice.”

ADAM SPLAVER, MD

39 I do yoga.
“Not only can severe stress directly harm your heart, but high levels of anxiety lead to other behaviors that are bad for your heart, like smoking, alcohol use, and eating cookies and pizza. I reduce stress through yoga; it helps me unwind, find balance, and escape for a short time every day.”

JENNIFER HAYTHE, MD

40 I eat dark chocolate.
A 2016 study found that a daily dose of dark chocolate helps prevent diabetes. The good news doesn’t stop there. “It is a source of polyphenols, which may improve arterial elasticity and help lower blood pressure. When looking for the perfect dark chocolate, keep an eye out for at least 75 percent cocoa, and then savor an ounce or two.”

CYNTHIA GEYER, MD,
medical director of Canyon Ranch in Lenox, Massachusetts