

Science AMA Series: I'm Dr. John Bisognano, a preventive cardiologist at University of Rochester. Let's talk about your heart, specifically how to prevent a heart attack and what to do if you've had on

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I've heard that cholesterol levels aren't as good of a predictor to heart disease as once thought. Is this true? I've heard inflammation is important to watch? What are the measures that we're supposed to pay attention to now?

[HelloWorldImMeg](#)

We are most interested in identifying things that we know are predictors of heart disease, like cholesterol, that we can do something about . Although inflammation is certainly linked to heart disease, simply treating the inflammation (which can be touch to do) doesn't necessarily help much. So going after targets like cholesterol is probably a far better approach and is something that we should still do.

What can I start doing now to maintain or achieve a healthy heart? 26 years old if that is of any relevance.

[Schwarz\\_Technik](#)

Your main focus should be on maintaining your normal weight and in keeping your activity level up. Really, there should be no restrictions on your ability to do anything at age 26 and, if you feel there are, it's probably an issue of weight or just not doing enough exercise. Calculate your body mass index, and if it's over 25, then it's too high and you need to lose weight.

Do you accept that consumption of 1 oz of nuts daily can reduce the annual risk of heart attacks by as much as 50% as shown in the Iowa Women's study, Adventists study, and a few more? If so, what is thought to be the protective component of nuts?

Edit: For the interested, this is a very well researched result that controlled for many possible confounding factors.

You can read about it more from [Harvard](#).

[Nice to Children](#)

I'm always a bit suspect of claims that something so easy can have such a large effect. But it probably does suggest that consumption of nuts can have an important effect, and I think that consumption of an ounce of nuts may have a beneficial effect. I certainly don't see a downside and would recommend that you go ahead and do it.

What is your feeling about perfectly healthy people who take baby aspirin as a preventative measure against heart attack?

[KingStinkStar](#)

The US Public Health Service has very clear guidelines about this, and suggests that for men over 45 and women over 55, with some cardiovascular risk (and no downsides from taking the aspirin) there can be a benefit from heart attack and stroke prevention. Naturally, people with known cardiovascular disease, regardless of age, may benefit from the aspirin.

Dear Dr. Bisognano, I would like to ask you the following. How strong is the relation between stress and heart disease? Is there anything I can do, as a 'stress sensitive' individual, to protect my heart from stress?

[Kreatio](#)

There may be a mild relationship between stress and heart disease, and in certain rare types of heart damage. However, the vast majority of people under stress do okay. However, the thing to watch is what bad habits can develop in people with stress -- things like overeating, lack of exercise, excess alcohol intake, and smoking. Those "things" are what drives the heart and vascular disease in the vast majority of stressed people

They have been conflicting reports recently on the role of salt in heart conditions/high blood pressure. What is the cardiologists position on it? Thank you.

Edit: posted under another comment, moved.

[DRHdez](#)

From a high blood pressure standpoint, there is rarely a reason to severely restrict salt. But on the other hand, an excessive intake of salt -- like more than 6 grams per day-- can drive blood pressure up and worsen cardiovascular outcomes. So, for most of my patients, I just recommend a diet that has moderation in sodium intake -- not too high and not too low . This seems to also be a diet that patients can tolerate in the long term.

Is 30 minutes of exercise a day really enough? People say that 30 minutes of exercise "extends" your lifespan by a certain amount, or reduces the likelihood of a heart attack by X percent. But is it really correlation or causation? Is the "30 minutes of exercise a day" mantra really about 30 minutes of exercise, or does it just correlate with a more healthy lifestyle and the fact that you *do* exercise which leads often to exercising more than the famed 30 minutes?

[mrpulp](#)

Thirty minutes of exercise, 4-6 times per week, is probably idea. And I mean the type of exercise that involves sweating and getting the heart rate up. More is not hugely better, but is better and if you enjoy it -- by all means do more. Be watchful for preventing injuries that will impair your ability to do exercise at this level for the long term -- as it's the long term ability to maintain a healthy lifestyle that is key. It has to be a lifestyle commitment, not a passing fad. And don't be discouraged if you fall off the exercise and lifestyle wagon. Just get back on, start slowly, and things will get better.

My former professor of Food Chemistry used to tell us to avoid drinking milk because of the high atherogenicity of the lauric miristic and palmitic acids. What are your thoughts on the matter?

[Aaabea](#)

Perhaps there may be a little something to that, but I don't think that focusing on avoidance of milk is going to be the answer to preventing heart disease for most people. It's probably best not to drink quarts per day, but a glass or two of milk throughout the day, in conjunction with a diet that is generally well-balanced and in moderation overall, is a better focus.

What is your opinion of Dr. Fuhman and Dr. Esselstyn's works which suggest plant based diets with no animal protein and little added fat can prevent and even reverse heart disease?

[knowssomestuff](#)

I think that these are wonderful diets, and do everything that are described by them. The big question is how many people are actually able to maintain such a diet for the long term. So, I recommend such a diet for the appropriately motivated person . For the others, I recommend as many steps in the direction of that type of diet that they can maintain for the long term.

- 1) Are there proven diets/lifestyles that can reverse atherosclerosis. I've heard of the Dean Ornish diet but I'm not sure if that's just another Oz situation.
- 2) What value do you see in a cardiac calcium screening CT scan for a 27 year old who's brother had a stent placed at 36?

[vasopressor](#)

Certain a vegan diet (like the Dean Ornish) diet has the potential of reversing atherosclerosis. If you can maintain such a diet, it would be great . But for most people, maintaining such a diet in the long-term is nearly impossible. However, taking 1-2 steps in that direction like decreasing animal fats, moving to more unprocessed carbohydrates, to name a few, is a good approach.

What is your opinion on Ketogenic/High Fat Low Carb diets and their effect on your health?

[Carb-inator](#)

Low carb diets have cycled in and out of our culture, at about 5-10 year intervals, for the past half century. In the right people, they are very effective in weight loss and this weight loss translates into better blood pressure and often improved cholesterol panels (much to the surprise of many people). In selecting the best diet for weight loss (which translates into better health almost always), one has to

select a diet that one can maintain over the course of months and months, recognizing that weight loss of more than a pound per week is usually not sustainable for most people. Some people can do it with a completely vegetarian diet. For others, a low-carb diet is the answer.

Regarding prevention, I was wondering if you would be brave enough to speak frankly about Lipitor. As you know, this is an aggressively marketed drug (both to consumers and to doctors, encouraging their prescribing of it). Also, in light of many Americans feeling that a pill is always the solution, I would like to know if you think it is effective and/or over-prescribed and also what role it plays in the **other** things that one should do to get control of their cholesterol and triglycerides? It seems like everyone and their brother are being put on it, at around a certain age.

[cheekygeek](#)

Just because something is aggressively marketed doesn't mean that it is not good. Lipitor (now available in a generic form under the name of "atorvastatin") is a medication that has scientifically proven benefit for slowing cardiovascular disease. Like any medication, it comes with the potential of side-effects that one has to watch for -- but for the vast majority of patients who are on it, it provides a huge benefit. The new guidelines for cholesterol management have greatly broadened the number of people who might be eligible to take this medication and who can anticipate a benefit from it in decreasing cardiovascular risk.

What is the truth about red wine and cardiac health?

[Suz73](#)

There are certain good chemicals that occur naturally in red wine (and in red grape juice) that people feel have a particular benefit in heart health. There's good evidence to support this, and I support my patients desire to have 1-2 glasses of red wine per day if they enjoy it.

How detrimental is regular alcohol consumption to the health of my heart?

[chocolatemilkcowboy](#)

A small amount of regular alcohol consumption probably has benefits from overall heart health. While I wouldn't recommend that somebody take up drinking (or increase their drinking) solely for improving their heart health, people who general drink 2 or fewer drinks per day may experience a benefit. Once one goes above 2 drinks per day, the negatives kick in -- risk of liver disease, risk of the negative social issues associated with drinking, and risk of injury (such as driving while under the influence), to name a few.

Are energy drinks a substantial cause for concern when it comes to heart health? I'm asking because I've developed a sort of addiction to Monster Energy drinks.

[cowyounow](#)

The amount of caffeine that a person can consume with these drinks, in addition to the relatively large amounts of caffeine in most commercially available "fast-food" coffee can be huge. While most people can tolerate it without side effect, it does pose a problem for some people. . They can get fast heart beats, extra heart beats, and a modest increase in blood pressure. If you're feeling that you're developing an "addiction" to these drinks, then perhaps you should avoid doing this. Developing an

addiction to anything is not a good long-term strategy for almost anything having to do with your health.

What are early warning signs of probable heart disease in a person's future? Meaning, they're "healthy" at the moment, but trouble is definitely down the road.

[Aerron](#)

Most important things to watch are the standard cardiac risk factors -- watch your blood pressure, don't smoke, maintain a healthy body weight (remember, nobody really has "big bones" and a body mass index of no higher than 25 is ideal), and exercise on a daily basis whenever possible.

In non-smoking, low alcohol consuming, regularly exercising males with no history of heart problems or similar problems, and with no genetic indications of heart problems in the family, what are the biggest risk factors?

The point of this question is that I am curious about what causes hypertension, blood clots and plaques in people with above average healthy lives.

[partysnatcher](#)

The truth of the matter is that we don't know everything about what drives cardiovascular risk. For a good many people, hypertension is just a genetic condition that shows itself later in life. Fortunately, we have treatments for high blood pressure these days and people who have high blood pressure don't have to just sit there and be exposed to an increased risk of heart attack, heart failure, stroke, and kidney disease the way that they were in the 1950's. We are living in the golden age of blood pressure treatment where we have great medications available, most with minimal if any side-effects, and most are generics. Drug "technology" is a great advance of our society, and for the right patients should be as embraced as all of the other technologies we see like smartphones, computers, Reddit, and solar power.

Should I regularly donate blood in the interests of heart health (and for other good reasons)?

[anonymouspimp](#)

Not necessarily in the interest of heart health, but there continues to be a need for blood for patients, and your donation helps assure that there is blood available to those who require it when the need occurs

Is regular weight lifting enough for good cardiovascular health or is aerobic exercise an essential component?

[nutt\\_butter\\_baseball](#)

A good balanced exercise component is key, and weight lifting (strength training of any sort) is an important addition to aerobic exercise as well in maintaining good cardiovascular health.

Dr John, what are the long term effects of eating pizza and cookies at least 5 times a week? My husband does this and I wonder what this will do to him, even though he works out regularly.

[jimmykrakorn](#)

Up to a certain age, the bad effects of lifestyle are not immediately evident. If he's a young guy, he can probably put ice cream on the cookies too, and there would be no bad effect immediately evident. But as he ages, this lifestyle will likely result in increased weight, lower activity, the risk of diabetes, and a progressive desire to do less and less exercise. His "addiction" to this type of food will be progressively more difficult to reverse, and he may well end up being a 300 pound 60 year old with multiple medical problems, on many medications, and a "habit" of eating bad foods that he cannot break. I would recommend that he start moderation of this diet now, step by step, with baby steps at first, to avoid the probable disastrous events of his future.

What do you think the impact on heart health would be from a hypothetical nation wide marijuana legalization?

[ciphilly](#)

It's hard to believe that inhaling smoke of any form can, in the big picture, be a good thing from a cardiovascular health standpoint. I feel that we're in a little window of time now where the negatives of widespread marijuana use have not yet been fully explored (like with tobacco in the 1950's) from a medical standpoint. Time will tell.