



Most Americans make New Year's resolutions — and setting goals to improve health, such as exercising more, typically top the list. This is a great time to focus on taking optimal care of your most important muscle: your heart. Large studies suggest that following an excellent lifestyle can reduce your risk for heart attacks and strokes by nearly 90%.

Embracing healthier habits can be simpler — and more fun — than you might imagine. The BaleDoneen Method's "prescriptions" for better heart health include laughter, hugs with your significant other and a daily "dose" of dark chocolate. We also have easy ways to get more exercise, proven tactics to shed extra pounds (even if you've struggled with weight loss in the past) and other science-backed strategies to improve cardiovascular wellness. Here are seven heart-smart resolutions and how to keep them in 2019 — and beyond.

1. Fit in fitness

New [government guidelines for physical activity](#) emphasize one key message: All of us can improve our health by moving more — any time, anywhere. Instead of vowing to exercise every day for the rest of your life, commit to doing it for a month, then take that success forward for another 30 days. Also figure out what would make working out more appealing — would dancing to music make it a "fun break?" Would an exercise buddy help — or a group session? And clip on a pedometer: Doing so motivates people to take 2,000 extra steps (one extra mile) per day, a [study](#) at Stanford University found. The new guidelines advise getting at least 150 to 300 minutes of moderate intensity aerobic exercise per week or 75 minutes of vigorous intensity aerobic exercise, plus muscle-strengthening exercise on two or more days a week. Check with your medical provider before starting a new fitness regimen to make sure it's appropriate for you.

2. Slim down

If getting to your ideal weight seems daunting, start with a more modest goal. Losing as little as 7 to 10 pounds reduces risk

for type 2 diabetes (a major risk factor for heart disease) by up to 70%, even if you are already prediabetic. To make it easier to shed those stubborn extra pounds, try tracking what you eat. In a study at Stanford University, people who keep a food diary lost twice as much weight as those who didn't keep any records. We call it a "BLT journal" — write down every bite, lick and taste. Many people are surprised at how many hidden calories they take in (even when preparing meals). There are several free apps that make it easy to keep a food diary, even when you're on the go. For more inspiration, check out our blog post about [7 heart-smart weight loss tips that really work](#).

3. Tame tension

Did you know that chronic stress is a major risk for developing cardiovascular disease (CVD)? 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! As we recently reported, [mindful](#)

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FISH OIL FOR HEART HEALTH: HELPFUL OR HYPE?

Fish oil is one of the world's most popular — and controversial — supplements. About 20 million Americans take it daily, hoping to reduce their risk for cardiovascular disease (CVD), the leading killer of Americans, often from heart attacks or strokes. However, decades of scientific research have yielded conflicting findings about the efficacy of the little capsules of omega-3 fatty acids from marine sources such as sardines, anchovies, mackerel or krill.

Two new Harvard studies have added to the confusion. You may have seen news headlines like, "Fish oil slashes heart risk," "No health benefits in fish oil," "Fish oil may lower heart attack and stroke risk" and "Rival studies: Fish oil is good for your heart — or maybe not." So who is right? Here is a closer look at the two studies, key takeaways and the facts you need to protect your arterial wellness.

How were these studies done and how credible are they?

Both studies were randomized clinical trials (RCTs) — the gold standard of scientific research — in which participants were randomly assigned to either take fish oil or a placebo. Separate teams of Harvard researchers conducted the two studies, both of which were published in *New England Journal of Medicine*.

In [the VITAL study](#), Dr. JoAnn Manson and other Harvard researchers studied 25,871 people, including 5,106 African-Americans. Participants were tracked for a median of 5.3 years to compare the rates of cardiovascular events (such as heart attacks, strokes and deaths from CV causes) in those who took fish oil, fish oil plus vitamin D, vitamin D and a placebo or two placebos. The goal was to evaluate how effective fish oil was for prevention of CVD in initially healthy men ages 50 and older and women ages 55 and older.

In [the REDUCE-IT study](#), Dr. Deepak Bhatt and a different team of Harvard scientists studied 8,179 patients. About 70% of them were 45 or older with established CVD, and the rest were 50 or older with diabetes and at least one major CVD risk factor. All participants were taking statins to lower their cholesterol and had elevated levels of another blood fat called triglycerides. The goal was to evaluate the effects of a fish oil-derived medication

versus a placebo on this high-risk group by tracking their rates of CV events for about 5 years.

Did one of these studies find that fish oil was ineffective?

Some of the media coverage of the VITAL study misrepresented its findings. Although the researchers concluded that there was no significant benefit of fish oil for its composite endpoint (a combination of the various CV events studied, including stroke), those who took 1 gram (2000 i.u.) of fish oil daily had a significant 17% reduction in a composite of coronary artery risks. No reduction was found in risk for stroke.

The most dramatic finding was a 28% reduction in heart attack risk over a five-year period as compared with the placebo group. In people with low dietary intake of fish, heart attack risk was reduced by 40% and risk for all major cardiovascular events fell by 19%. The study also found particular benefits of fish oil for African-American participants, who had a 77% decrease in their heart attack risk. "If that can be confirmed in a follow-up study, then it could point to a very promising approach to reducing a health disparity," [Manson told Healthday](#). African-Americans have a higher risk for CVD than Caucasians and other racial groups.

"A reduction in heart attacks this profound has not been seen since in primary

prevention since the early trials of aspirin therapy," commented Dr. Satjit Bhusri, a cardiologist at Lenox Hill Hospital in New York City who was not involved with the study. "This is a very important and impressive trial. Its results will have a lasting change in the prevention of heart disease," he told Healthday.

What did the other study find?

In the REDUCE-IT study, half of the participants took a prescription supplement containing a highly purified form of EPA (one of the omega-3 fatty acids found in fish oil), at a dose of 2 grams. Compared to the placebo group, those who took the EPA supplement, known as icosapent ethyl, had an overall 25% risk reduction for CV events. These patients were also less likely to have a heart attack or stroke, be hospitalized for chest pain or require heart procedures, such as angioplasty, stents, or bypass surgery. The study also reported a 24% drop in risk for death from CV causes, nonfatal heart attacks and nonfatal strokes in the group that got the drug.

"We are reporting a remarkable degree of risk reduction," stated Dr. Bhatt, who led the study. The supplement, sold under the brand name Vascepa, is FDA-approved as a treatment for high triglycerides. What was particularly impressive about these findings is that all of the patients were



December Recipe

Pomegranate Glazed Salmon with Fennel

Rich in heart-healthy omega-3 fatty acids and disease-fighting antioxidants, this festive, gluten-free recipe is perfect for a holiday meal that will delight your family and friends. Studies suggest that a diet high in omega-3 fatty acids helps prevent blood clots, stabilizes abnormal heart rhythms and improves blood pressure, factors that may explain why people who eat fish two or more times a week have a lower risk for heart attacks than those who avoid fish.

INGREDIENTS

4 boneless salmon filets, skin on
2 tablespoons olive oil
2 shallots, thinly sliced into rings
2 fennel bulbs, thinly sliced
Pepper
½ cup pomegranate seeds, for garnish
Minced Italian parsley or sprigs of fresh rosemary or thyme, for garnish

FOR THE GLAZE

¾ cup pomegranate juice
3 tablespoons low-sodium, gluten-free soy sauce
2 garlic cloves, minced

Adapted from Primaverakitchen.com and feastingathome.com.

PREPARATION

Preheat oven to 400° F. Whisk glaze ingredients together in a large bowl. Add salmon filets and marinate for 15 minutes. Place salmon, skin-side down, in a parchment-lined roasting pan and bake for 7 minutes. Meanwhile, heat olive oil over medium-high heat in a large skillet and sauté fennel and shallots until golden and slightly softened (about 5 minutes). While the fennel and shallots are cooking, pour glaze into a small saucepan and bring to a boil over medium-high heat. Cook 3-5 minutes until thick and syrupy.

Remove salmon from oven after 7 minutes and pour half of the reduced glaze over the salmon. Arrange fennel and shallots around the salmon, season with pepper to taste and return to the oven. Bake for an additional 5-7 minutes or until the salmon is cooked to your liking. Transfer filets to four plates and pour the remaining glaze over the salmon. Top with pomegranate seeds and herbs and enjoy!

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already taking a statin yet received additional protection against CV events.

"I think we've stumbled onto something here in terms of a new class of drugs," Dr. Bhatt, a professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School and executive director of interventional cardiovascular programs at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston, told [NBC News](http://NBCNews.com). "Honestly, I think it's as exciting as the statin era, when statins were first becoming available and we were learning about all the things that they can do. I view this as a similar sort of breakthrough."

Why are omega-3 fatty acids good for the heart?

The American Heart Association reports that people whose diet is high in omega-3 fatty acids have a lower risk for CVD and dangerous heart rhythms that can lead to sudden death. Omega-3 fatty acids have also been shown to reduce triglycerides, blood pressure and growth of arterial

plaque in people who have CVD. In addition, omega-3 fatty acids also have anti-inflammatory effects, which may help keep plaque from forming in the first place.

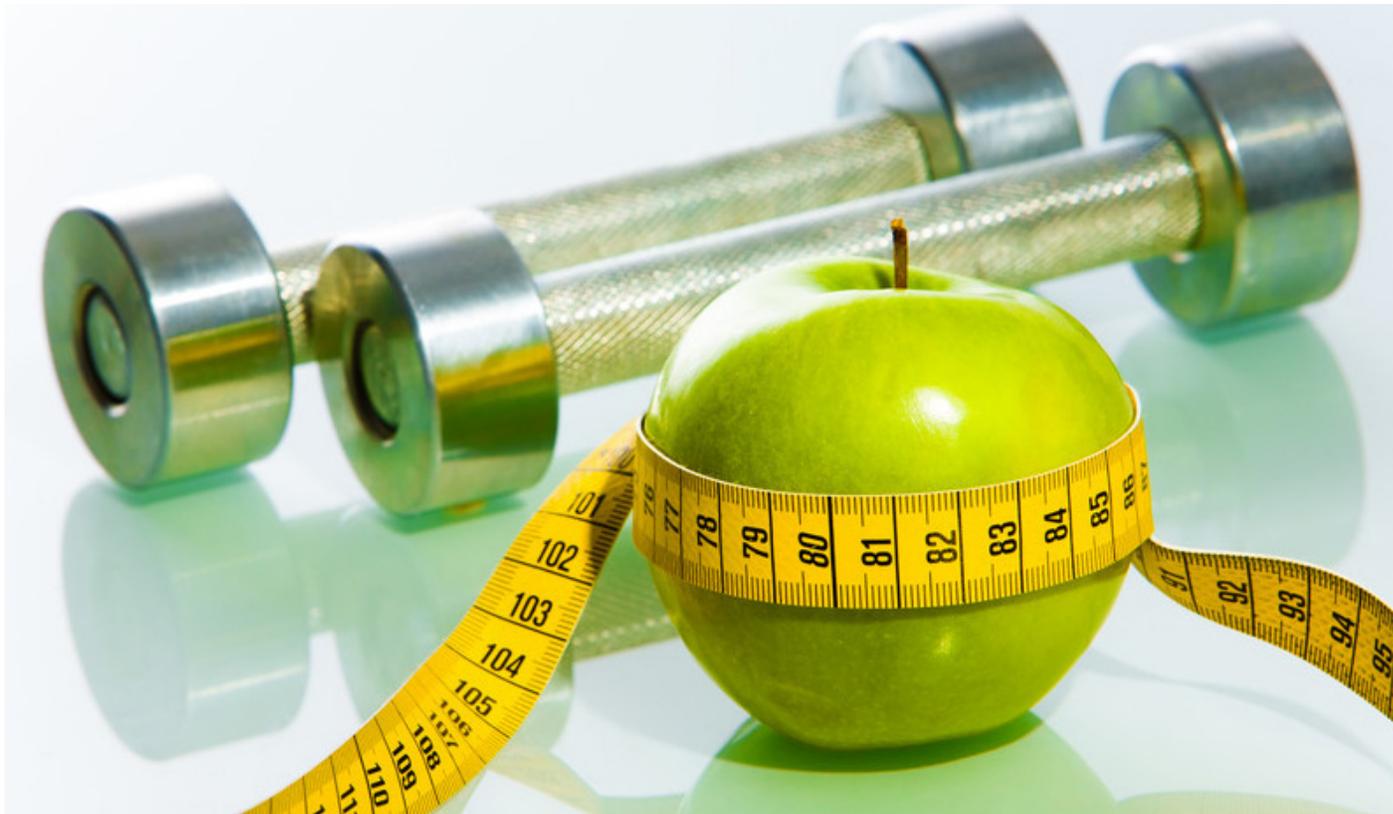
What are the BaleDoneen Method take-aways about fish oil and heart health?

In general, it's best to get the nutrients you need for optimal heart health through a healthy diet. A large body of research suggests that people who eat fish several times a week, particularly fatty fish, have a lower risk for CVD than those who eat little or no fish. Fish that are high in omega-3 fatty acids include salmon, lake trout, mackerel, tuna, herring and sardines.

However, many people do not get enough heart-protective omega-3 fatty acids from their diet because they eat little or no fish. Taking fish oil supplements may be a good option for this group, as well as African-Americans (based on the study findings), but it's important to talk to your medical provider before taking any supplement to make sure it's appropriate for you.

The BaleDoneen Method recommends [a diet based on your DNA](#). We use a simple saliva test to analyze your Apolipoprotein E (Apo E) genotype, which influences both your lifetime risk for heart disease and the best diet to avoid it. While most people can benefit from the Mediterranean diet often advised to protect heart health, about 25% of the population has the ApoE 3/4 or ApoE 4/4 genotypes, which are linked to the highest risk for CVD. People with these genotypes should eat a very low-fat diet (less than 20% fat). That can include moderate amounts of fatty fish (no more than four ounces daily).

If you haven't had your ApoE genotype checked, talk to your medical provider about this testing and the best eating plan to keep your arteries healthy. Also check out the BaleDoneen book, [Beat the Heart Attack Gene](#), to learn more about our genetically guided approach to heart attack and stroke prevention, which has been shown in [two recent peer-reviewed studies](#) to effectively detect, prevent or reverse arterial disease.



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[meditation](#) is one of the best ways to defuse the toxic effects of tension. Laughter is also relaxing and boosts blood vessel health, studies show. Try laughter yoga, which combines self-triggered mirth with yogic breathing to draw oxygen deep into the body. Also embrace the cuddle cure: Researchers from University of North Carolina report that holding hands — or even a 10-second hug from your significant other — significantly reduces tension, heart rate and blood pressure. And it feels good!

4. Shake the sugar habit

Consuming just one or two sugar-sweetened beverages daily — such as energy drinks, fruit drinks, soda or coffee drinks — raises risk for a heart attack or dying from CVD by 35 percent, a [Harvard study](#) found. Instead, quench your thirst with [our refreshing fruit and herb infused water recipes](#). While most sugary foods should be avoided, there is one sweet treat that's actually good for your heart: In [a study of more than 9,000 people](#), those who ate an average of 7.5 grams of dark chocolate (one small square) daily were 39% less likely to suffer a heart attack or stroke than those who averaged 1.7 grams or less daily. An even bigger study found that eating small amounts of dark chocolate trimmed diabetes risk by 31%.

5. Safeguard your smile — and your arteries

Did you know that taking great care of your teeth and gums could actually save your life? In a large study of older adults, those who hadn't seen a dentist in the previous year had a 50% higher death rate than those who got dental care two or more times a year. Here's why it's important to get checked for gum disease: A [recent BaleDoneen study](#) was the first to identify oral bacteria from gum disease as a contributing cause of CVD. This research could

[revolutionize how dental providers diagnose and manage gum disease](#), which affects the majority of U.S. adults over age 30. Also check out [our easy four-step plan](#) to optimize your oral health and prevent heart attacks.

6. Eat the rainbow

Did you know that eating a variety of colorful fruits and vegetables can have amazing benefits, including lowering your risk for heart attack, stroke, high blood pressure, diabetes and several forms of cancer? What's more, eating certain vegetables may be linked to better memory and longer life, [recent studies suggest](#). Yet fewer than one in ten adults eat the recommended amount of these nutritional powerhouses, according to the CDC. One easy way to reach your goal: Fill half your plate with fruits and vegetables at each meal.

7. Get a heart health screening

Eighty percent of strokes — and 70% of fatal heart attacks — occur in people who had no previous symptoms. Yet these catastrophes are potentially preventable with early detection and treatment, highlighting the potentially lifesaving value of the comprehensive, personalized evaluation [the BaleDoneen Method](#) offers. To directly check each patient for hidden signs of arterial disease, we use leading-edge lab and vascular imaging tests, including [a painless, FDA-approved ultrasound exam of the neck called carotid intima-media thickness or CIMT](#). Two recent [peer-reviewed studies](#) have shown that our evidence-based, precision-medicine approach effectively detects, treats and prevents CVD, helping people avoid heart attacks and strokes, even [if they have previously suffered one or more of these events](#) or [have high genetic risk](#).