

## **12** **Heart-Smart** **Tips to Keep You** **Safe, Healthy and** **Happy Over** **the Holidays**

For many people, the holiday season will feel different this year. Gatherings with your extended family may not be possible, community celebrations may go virtual or be canceled, and many other beloved traditions may be upended by safety considerations. Yet we can still find joy and inner peace by applying lessons we've learned about resiliency, hope, patience and flexibility during difficult times.

"Because of the restrictions of the pandemic, we may be able to find and experience the true spirit of the holiday season with more clarity," says psychology professor Jonathan Kanter, who is studying how people cope with social distancing. Indeed, by embracing the change, we can focus on what's truly important: relationships, health and practices that express love, compassion and gratitude. Here are 12 ways to celebrate safely and happily.



### **1. Start healthy new traditions.**

Embracing change means seeing it as an opportunity to shake things up in a positive way. Instead of spending the holidays cooped up in the house, surrounded by rich snacks, take the celebration outdoors. Exercising in natural settings diminishes stress, enhances sleep, [improves mental health](#) and [can even add years to your life](#). Some fun activities to consider: taking a family walk after dinner to admire the neighbors' holiday lights, ice skating at a local rink, building a snowman, or playing outdoor games, such as flag foot-

ball. Also get the family involved in making healthy new holiday recipes, such as our [shaved Brussels sprouts and pomegranate salad](#) and [our cinnamon spice carrot pie with pecan topping](#).

### **2. Keep a gratitude journal.**

Focusing on what's good in your life — and writing it down — has many benefits. It can help you feel calmer, get a new perspective on what's important to you and help you become more self-aware. A recent study reported that expressing grati-

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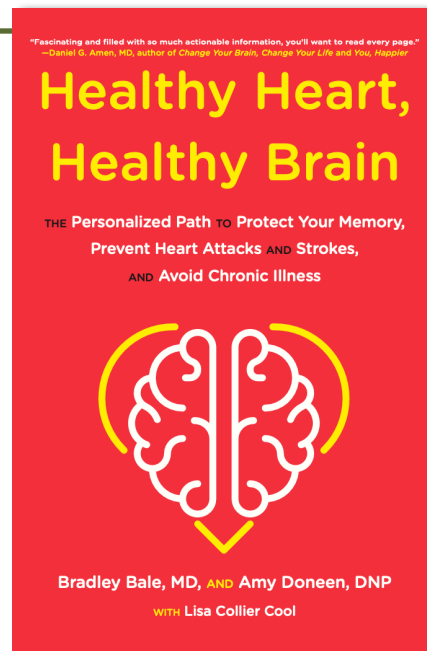
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# The Ultimate Holiday Gift: Optimal Heart and Brain Health!

One of our patients announced that he'd found the perfect holiday present for his friends and family: He's ordered copies of *Healthy Heart, Healthy Brain* for everyone on his gift list. Now available for pre-orders in hardcover, e-book and audio editions on [Amazon](#), [Barnes & Noble](#) and other online and retail booksellers, this new book by Bradley Bale, MD and Amy Doneen, DNP with Lisa Collier Cool transcends the traditional medical silos of cardiology, neurology, endocrinology and others with a unique, comprehensive approach designed to prevent heart attacks, strokes, chronic diseases and memory loss in people of all ages, regardless of their body type, medical history or genes. Here's some of the advance praise it's received:

***"Healthy Heart, Healthy Brain will help you change your body, heart and mind. I can't recommend this groundbreaking book from Bale and Doneen enough. Fascinating and filled with so much actionable information, you'll want to read every page."***

**— DANIEL G. AMEN, MD**  
**NY Times bestselling author of**  
***Change Your Brain, Change Your Life and You, Happier***



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tude can enhance emotional well-being, reduce stress, anxiety and depression and improve relationships. Other research suggests that practicing gratitude improves sleep quality, reduces blood pressure, enhances overall health and increases resilience and mental strength during difficult times. What's more, regular gratitude journaling has been shown to increase optimism and happiness. In other words, the more we count and record our blessings, the more blessed we are likely to feel!

### 3. Put self-care at the top of your to-do list.

To reduce holiday stress, [advises Dr. Kanter](#), "look for small, restorative moments, like how your hands feel when washing them under warm water." Also devote ten minutes a day to mindful meditation. Sit in a relaxed position, close your eyes and focus on your breathing and the present moment as you let stressful or upsetting thoughts float away. Many [studies have reported remarkable benefits](#) from this simple practice, including reduced inflammation, lower blood pressure, improved brain health and memory and better moods. Prayer is another great way to soothe the mind and spirit, enhancing cardiovascular wellness.

### 4. Practice mindful eating.

A wonderful way to avoid overeating — and enjoy your food more — is to slow down and savor each bite. Mindful eating helps you understand your body better, manage food cravings and feel full sooner, with less food. As you shop for holiday foods, prepare them or sit down for a holiday dinner, involve all of your senses in the experience. Include [colorful fruits and vegetables](#), fragrant, [heart-healthy spices](#) and interesting shapes and textures in your meal. Put your fork and knife down between bites and consider how you feel. "You can tell when you've had enough of the flavor," registered dietician Monica Meadows [recently told U.S. News & World Report](#). "The taste buds get satiated and it's not pleasurable anymore."

### 5. Brush your teeth after meals.

During the holidays, it's easy to fall into a pattern of grazing all day. And not surprisingly, studies suggest that on average, Americans pack on about five extra pounds between Thanksgiving and New Year's. One simple but effective hack to combat holiday gain is to brush and floss after each meal. Not only does that signal that you're done eating, but you'll be less tempted to ruin your minty-fresh breath with another bite of

pie five minutes later. In addition, taking excellent care of your teeth and gums can [powerfully reduce your risk for heart attacks](#), strokes, [Alzheimer's disease](#), certain cancers and [many other chronic or life-threatening conditions](#).

### 6. Laugh every day — intentionally.

One of our favorite Bible verses starts, "A merry heart doeth good like medicine" (Proverbs 17.22). Many studies bear this out. For example, a 2020 study found that laughing once or more a week slashed the risk of suffering a heart attack, stroke or other cardiovascular events by 40 percent, as compared to laughing less than once a month. Based on this and other research with similar findings, we actually prescribe laughter to our patients. Wonderful ways to include more humor in your life include reading funny books, watching comedies or hilarious internet videos of children and pets doing silly things, and laughter yoga, which combines self-triggered mirth with deep yogic breathing to draw oxygen deep in your body. Also ask friends to tell their favorite jokes or get a joke-a-day calendar to start each day with a chuckle. All of these actions reduce stress, contribute to better blood vessel health and make life more fun.

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• *December Recipe* •

Curried Carrot Ginger Soup

Vibrant in color and flavor, this perfectly spiced soup combines the savory sweetness of roasted carrots with creamy coconut milk and the tang of ginger. Curcumin (the spice that gives curry its vivid yellow hue) has been called “the golden spice of long life and happiness” because of its wealth of health benefits. It’s been shown to boost mood, reduce blood pressure, decrease inflammation and improve arterial health in people with and without diabetes, all of which may reduce heart attack and stroke risk. Carrots are a nutritional powerhouse packed with vitamins, fiber and plant compounds that support eye, gut and cardiovascular wellness.



### INGREDIENTS

2 pounds carrots, washed and unpeeled  
3 tablespoons olive oil, divided  
Freshly ground black pepper, to taste  
1 large yellow onion, diced  
1 red bell pepper, diced  
2 tablespoons freshly grated ginger

1 tablespoon ground coriander  
1 tablespoon curry powder  
1 teaspoon turmeric  
1 15-ounce can coconut milk  
*Optional garnishes: Chopped cilantro leaves, toasted chickpeas or pumpkin seeds (pepi-tas), plain yogurt or a squeeze of fresh lime juice.*

Adapted from [alexandracooks.com](http://alexandracooks.com) and [naturallyella.com](http://naturallyella.com).

### PREPARATION

Heat oven to 425°F. Trim root ends off carrots, cut lengthwise and slice into 2-inch pieces. In a small bowl, toss carrots with 1 tablespoon olive oil and season with black pepper. Transfer to a baking dish and roast in oven for 25 minutes or until edges start to caramelize. Meanwhile, heat 2 tablespoons of olive oil over high heat in a large pot. Add onions, bell pepper and ginger. Reduce heat to low, stir and cover. Cook for 15 minutes, then stir in coriander, curry powder and turmeric. Add roasted carrots and coconut milk and bring to simmer. Use an immersion blender or food processor to puree. Garnish with optional toppings, if using, then enjoy!



## Holiday health resources

For more ideas how to protect and enhance your physical, mental and spiritual well-being during the holidays, visit these websites:

**Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.** [“Safer Ways to Celebrate Holidays.”](#) Includes advice about travel, gatherings, indoor and outdoor activities, event planning and more. For additional tips from the CDC, also check out, [“12 Ways to Have a Healthy Holiday Season.”](#)

**American Heart Association.** [“Healthy Holiday Living and Giving.”](#) Mayo Clinic. “Stress, depression and the holidays: Tips for coping.”

**BaleDoneen Method.** [“Heart-Healthy Holiday Gifts”](#) and [“5 Heart-Healthy New Year’s Resolutions and How to Keep Them.”](#)

**The Heart Attack & Stroke Prevention Center.** [Heart-healthy recipes](#) and [“Eat Smart Tips to Optimize Your Heart and Brain Health.”](#)

**Office on Women’s Health.** [“5 Tips to Beat Holiday Health Pitfalls.”](#)

**Stony Brook University Hospital.** [“’Tis the season for protecting your heart.”](#)



PHOTO BY ALEX BELOGUB ON UNSPLASH

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### 7. Rethink your drink.

Consuming just one or two sugar sweetened beverages daily — such as energy drinks, fruit drinks or soda — raises risk for a heart attack or dying from heart disease by 35 percent, diabetes risk by 26 percent and stroke risk by 16 percent, a Harvard study found. Conversely, [a six-year study of more than 20,000 people](#) found that those who drank five or more glasses of water daily had half the risk of developing fatal heart disease than those who swigged two or fewer glasses daily. Coffee and tea also have a variety of health perks, including reducing risk for stroke and dementia, according to a [new study published in PLOS Medicine](#).

### 8. Consider alcohol alternatives.

Many prospective studies have linked moderate alcohol intake (one drink a day for women and two for men) to a 25-40 percent lower risk for cardiovascular disease. However, 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, consuming more than one drink a day significantly raised risk for [atrial fibrillation](#), an irregular heart rhythm that is a major risk factor for stroke. If you don't currently consume alcohol, CDC and the BaleDoneen Method recommend against starting. Quench your thirst with plain or sparkling water flavored with a spritz of lemon or lime, or try our [herb and fruit-infused flavored water recipes](#) as healthy alternatives.

### 9. Volunteer.

Helping others is good for the heart — literally! Large studies have shown that people who volunteer regularly have healthier blood pressure levels and feel more connected to their community. Donating your time to a worthy cause may also give you a greater sense of purpose in life, which in turn is associated with lower risk for heart attacks and strokes and increased longevity, according to [pooled findings from studies of 136,265 people](#). Another [study](#) found that people who performed kindness activities for seven days had a dramatic boost in happiness — and the more acts of kindness they committed, the more their joy increased.

### 10. Dance to your favorite music.

It's important to stay active during the holidays, with at least 30 minutes a day of aerobic exercise. Not only is dancing a fun way to keep fit, but it may also help keep your memory sharp, according to [intriguing new studies](#). For example, a study of older adults who were initially free of dementia analyzed the effects of various physical activities, including golf, swimming, exercise classes and biking. Only one of them — dancing — decreased risk for memory loss (by 76 percent) in the five-year study. Busting some moves on the dance floor — or in your living room — also improves muscle tone, coordination and balance. And like other forms of aerobic exercise, it boosts levels of the feel-good brain chemical serotonin.

### 11. Sleep well.

Along with getting the seven to eight hours of sleep that is optimal for heart health, it's also important to stick to a consistent sleep schedule. A recent study linked "social jet lag" — going to bed and waking up later on weekends or holidays than you do on weekdays — to poorer health, as compared to sticking to the same schedule seven days a week. Other [research](#) links skimping on slumber to increased risk for heart attack, strokes, high blood pressure, obesity and depression. Check out [our five natural strategies to get the sound, restorative rest you need](#) for optimal cardiovascular wellness.

### 12. Make beautiful memories.

As you consider how to simplify and reinvent the holidays, here's something else to keep in mind. Ultimately, what really matters most are the experiences you share with your friends and loved ones — not what's on the dinner table or in the presents you unwrap. Take the time to express your love, suggests Dr. Kanter: "Together, look through old family albums and videos. Recollect your favorite shared memories. Remind each other about their qualities that you love, the things they have done for you in the past, how you appreciate them. We all want to be seen and understood for who we are and who we want to be. Let them know that you see them and how you really feel. That is what the holidays are about."

# 10 THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT THE AMERICAN HEART ASSOCIATION'S NEW DIETARY GUIDELINES



PHOTO BY DIANA POLEKHINA ON UNSPLASH

For the first time in 15 years, the American Heart Association (AHA) has issued new guidance on heart-healthy eating. Published as a scientific statement in the AHA journal *Circulation* in November, the guidelines highlight “balance,” rather than one-size-fits-all rules. “The emphasis is on dietary patterns, not specific foods or nutrients,” said Alice H. Lichtenstein, who led the statement’s writing committee.

“And it’s not just about what people shouldn’t be eating,” added Lichtenstein in an accompanying AHA news release. “The focus is really on what people should be eating, so they can customize it to their personal preferences and lifestyles.” Here is a closer look at the new guidelines and key BaleDoneen Method takeaways about how to choose what’s on your plate wisely.

### What are the new guidelines, exactly?

The AHA’s scientific statement, “[2021 Dietary Guidance to Improve Cardiovascular Health](#),” includes the ten recommendations listed in bold type below. For each of them, we’ve included our actionable tips and additional resources to learn more. We applaud the AHA for taking a personalized approach to cardiovascular health, which has been a core concept of the BaleDoneen Method since its inception two decades ago. To optimize your eating plan, we recommend following [a diet based on your DNA](#), as discussed in more depth below.

### Achieve and maintain a healthy weight.

If you are overweight or obese, even small changes in your diet can dramatically improve your heart health. For example, [a recent study](#) found that people who ate 300 fewer calories a day — the equivalent of two chocolate chip cookies or a slice of pizza — not only lost an average of 16 pounds over a two-year period but also had significant improvements in their cholesterol, blood pressure, blood sugar and other markers of cardiovascular and metabolic health. Also consider [intermittent fasting](#): Studies show that it’s one of the best anti-inflammatory diets around and can help reduce or even reverse insulin resistance, the root cause of 70 percent of heart attacks, many strokes and almost all cases of type 2 diabetes.

### Eat a variety of fruit and vegetables.

Consuming more of these nutritional powerhouses could save your life! Two Harvard studies of nearly 110,000 men and women found that people who ate eight or more servings of fruits and veggies daily were 30 percent less likely to suffer a heart attack or stroke than those who ate less than 1.5 servings. Another recent study of nearly 400,000 men and women found those whose diet was highest in fiber (found in most fruits and vegetables) had a nearly 60 percent lower risk of dying from cardiovascular disease, infectious disease, or respiratory disorders. One easy way to get a full spectrum of health benefits is to “[eat the rainbow](#)” by including a variety of colorful fruits and veggies in your daily diet. Also check out our easy recipe for [building the perfect vegetable soup](#).

### Choose whole grain foods.

Although the AHA guidelines don’t provide much detail about which grains to choose, there is [strong scientific evidence that people with certain genotypes benefit from following a gluten-free diet](#) to protect their heart health. We use a one-time blood test to identify your haptoglobin (Hp) genotype, which offers insight into heart disease risk and which foods and supplements are beneficial for you. The Hp gene has two alleles, Hp 1 and Hp 2. Since you

inherit one allele from each parent, there are three possible genotypes: Hp 1-1 (linked to low risk for heart disease), Hp 1-2 (intermediate risk) and Hp 2-2 (high risk). Recent studies suggest that people with the Hp 1-2 and Hp 2-2 genotypes benefit from a gluten-free diet as part of their heart-attack-and-stroke-prevention plan, while there’s no cardiovascular advantage for those with the Hp 1-1 genotype. Gluten-free grains include amaranth, buckwheat, oats, corn, quinoa and brown or wild rice.

### Choose healthy proteins, mostly from plant sources.

The guidelines advise using plant-based protein sources (such as beans, nuts and seeds) over processed meats. A large body of research suggests that people who eat fish several times a week — particularly oily fish, such as tuna, salmon, sardines, lake trout and herring — have a lower risk for cardiovascular disease than those who eat little or no fish. Because oily fish are a good source of heart-healthy omega-3 fatty acids, the [AHA recommends](#) having at least two servings weekly and substituting nonfat and low-fat dairy products for the full-fat versions. If you eat meat, choose small portions that are lean and unprocessed. For more ideas on heart-healthy nutrition, [check out our delicious recipes](#).

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**Use liquid plant oils.**

The guidelines advise opting for plant oils, such as olive, sunflower, canola or walnut oil, instead of tropical oils (such as coconut, palm and palm kernel oil), animal fats (such as butter and lard) and partially hydrogenated fats. Unhealthy oils to avoid may be listed as “trans fats” on food labels. Our [DNA-based diet uses your Apo E genotype](#) to determine the optimum amount of fat in your diet. This test analyzes your Apolipoprotein E (Apo E) genotype, which influences both your lifetime risk for coronary heart disease (CHD) and the best diet to avoid it. The Apo E gene has three variants (E2, E3 and E4), resulting in 6 possible genotypes: Apo E 2/2, Apo E 2/3, Apo E 2/4, Apo E 3/3, Apo E 3/4 and Apo E 4/4. People with Apo E 2/2 or 2/3 genotypes have the lowest risk for CHD and do best with a diet containing 30% to 35% fat from heart-healthy sources, such as Omega-3 rich oily fish, nuts and olive oil. Those with the 3/3 or 2/4 genotypes benefit from the Mediterranean diet, which emphasizes plant-based foods, fish and moderate amounts of yogurt and cheese. This diet should have 25% to 30% fat. For people with the Apo E 3/4 or 4/4 genotypes, which are linked to the highest CHD risk, the best bet for prevention is to eat a very low-fat diet (less than 20% fat) and limit or avoid alcohol.

**Choose minimally processed foods.**

Make fresh foods and those with minimal processing (such as raw, unsalted nuts) the mainstays of your diet and avoid packaged foods that contain preservatives, artificial colors or flavors and chemicals you can’t pronounce. Common examples of processed foods include breakfast cereals, meat products (such as bacon, salami, sausages and deli meats), microwave or frozen meals, packaged snacks (such as potato chips and taco chips) and store-bought baked goods.

**Minimize or avoid foods and beverages with added sugar.**

As [we recently reported](#), sugar is actually worse for your heart than saturated fat. In fact, a recent study found that a diet high in sugar triples risk for fatal cardiovascular disease, and other research shows that excessive sugar intake raises risk for cancer, diabetes, obesity and many other chronic or life-threatening diseases. About 75 percent of packaged foods contain added sugar, including many that you don’t think of as sweet, such as tomato sauce, salad



dressing and many sauces and condiments. Watch out for sugar’s various aliases on food labels, such as sucrose (table sugar), corn syrup, molasses, honey, fructose and almost any other ingredient that ends with “ose.” A good rule is to avoid any food that lists sugar in any of its guises among the first 3 ingredients. Also ditch sweet drinks: 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, diabetes risk by 26 percent, and stroke risk by 16 percent, according to a [2015 Harvard study](#). Instead, quench your thirst with our [refreshing fruit and herb-infused water recipes](#).

**Limit alcohol consumption.**

Over the years, [many prospective studies](#) have reported an association between moderate drinking (one drink daily for women and two for men) and a 25-40 percent reduction in risk for CHD. Some researchers also reported decreased risk for heart attack, stroke, type 2 diabetes and high blood pressure in moderate drinkers. However, alcohol consumption also has a wide range of short- and long-term perils, including increased risk for atrial fibrillation (a dangerous type of irregular heart rhythm that is a major risk factor for

stroke) and some forms of cancer. A study of nearly 600,000 people across 19 countries reported that having ten or more drinks a week shortened life expectancy. The AHA and BaleDoneen takeaway: If you don’t currently drink alcohol, don’t start. As we recently reported, following [an optimal lifestyle can reduce your heart attack and stroke risk by up to 90 percent](#), even if it doesn’t include alcohol. If you imbibe moderately, discuss the risks and benefits with your provider.

**Select and prepare foods with little or no salt.**

Cut back on the “[Salty Six](#),” bread and rolls, pizza, sandwiches, cold cuts and cured meats, soup and burritos and tacos, all of which typically contain high levels of sodium. Limiting or avoiding packaged, processed foods, which are typically high in salt, may lower your blood pressure or help you avoid hypertension in the first place, the AHA reports. It’s also important to be aware that [blood pressure guidelines have recently changed](#). Nearly half of U.S. adults — many of whom are undiagnosed and unaware of their peril — have high blood pressure, a condition that is often called “a silent killer” because it gives few clues to its presence as it wrecks hidden mayhem on the blood vessels and vital organs, including the heart and brain.

**Make heart-healthy choices wherever you eat.**

Recent studies show that people who dine out frequently consume nearly 500 more calories daily than those who mostly eat at home. Not only were people who often ate at restaurants at increased risk for obesity, but in one large study, this group was also 31 percent more likely to have a dangerous buildup of arterial plaque, boosting their risk for heart attacks and strokes — and were also at increased risk for diabetes and high blood pressure. To counteract these threats, the AHA recommends that people follow its heart-healthy dietary guidelines no matter where they eat. For example, people can choose salad over French fries when they’re eating out, and have fresh fruit instead of chocolate cake for dessert. Another option is to pack healthy meals to enjoy when you’re away from home, such as [our zesty Thai carrot and cucumber noodle salad in a Mason jar](#) or our [Must-Have Kale Salad to Go](#). For more heart-healthy recipes, [click here](#).