

# Heart TALK

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

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*Thoughts from  
Dr. Amy*



## **The Lifesaving Treatment Many Cardiologists Don't Prescribe**

Joe I. used to lead a very limited — and rather lonely — life. “I wasn’t healthy enough for any sustained physical activity, including sex or even going out on a date,” says the retired real estate broker from Granbury, Texas. “I had such severe chest pain that I couldn’t even walk from my house to the car without taking nitroglycerin — and I needed it so often that I had to ration the 100 pills that my insurance plan allowed me every month, so I didn’t run out.”

His symptoms were so severe that specialists advised a heart transplant. But Joe balked. “I wasn’t sold on the idea that I needed a new heart when I’d never had a heart attack.”

However, he worried that he’d run out of treatment options. He’d already undergone quadruple bypass for his coronary artery disease (CAD), dramatically improved his lifestyle, and was taking several medications — yet kept getting sicker. Was there anything left to try, short of getting a new heart?

### **Determined to Avoid His Father’s Fate**

Joe feared that he was on the same tragic trajectory as his father. “He died at age 62 from a heart attack, five years after his quadruple bypass surgery — and I knew that if I didn’t find the right treatment, I was rapidly approaching a point at which my life would also be cut short,” recalls Joe.

Joe’s battle with arterial disease began when he developed angina while hiking. Also known as angina pectoris, angina is chest pain due to insufficient flow of oxygenated blood to heart muscle. This painful symptom affects about 10 million Americans, with about 500,000 new cases each year. The most common culprit is CAD, which can lead to narrowing of the arteries that supply the heart.

Then 57, Joe was treated with open heart surgery and a quadruple bypass. He was the same age as his father had been when the older man had undergone these procedures decades earlier. Afterwards, he spent six weeks in cardiac rehab, receiving education on healthy lifestyle changes to enhance recovery after cardiac surgery. Determined to

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avoid his father's fate, he quit smoking, dramatically changed his diet and began working out regularly.

**A Seemingly Miraculous Recovery**

"During cardiac rehab. I told the nurse that I knew this treatment would help slow down my disease, and I might live a little longer, but I thought my heart would get me in the end," recalls Joe. "She said that physicians used to think all they could do was keep patients from getting worse, but the [BaleDoneen Method](#) had had success in [halting and reversing this disease.](#)"

Initially, however, lifestyle improvements seemed to do the trick. Before long, Joe, an avid nature photographer, felt well enough to resume his favorite activities: hiking, kayaking and training his German short-haired pointers for bird-dog competitions — physically challenging events that required following the fast-moving dogs through rough terrain on horseback to find hidden birds.

**Terrifying Test Results**

However, this seemingly miraculous improvement lasted only 18 months. Not only did the angina return, but it became so severe that despite nitroglycerin and several medications, even the slightest exertion left Joe in agony. His cardiologist ordered heart tests — with shocking results. "First I was told that I had new blockages, which I kind of knew, then the cardiologist said that two of the vein grafts in my bypasses had totally failed," he says.

"The cardiologist — with a heart surgeon standing next to him — said that if they tried putting in new grafts or stents, it might cause a heart attack," recalls

Joe. "He also said that I might not even survive the surgery. That really shook me and my family started crying," adds the divorced dad. "I told my sons and their wives that maybe this was what it boiled down to, but I wanted to get a second opinion. I felt that the cardiologist wasn't looking at why I'd gone downhill so fast."

Even on medication, reports Joe, "my blood pressure was staying at 150/90, and I'd done enough research to know that wasn't normal. But when I asked the cardiologist about it, he'd say, 'For your age, that's a decent number. You can live with that.' I felt that I was being herded along, like a sheep in a pen, from one surgical intervention to another. Basically, I was being told that I'd drawn a bad hand in life and all they could do was put in a new heart."

**Optimal Medical Therapy: An Excellent, But Underused Treatment for Arterial Disease**

Joe had attended a lecture about the BaleDoneen Method and hoped it could help him. However, he also had a fatalistic attitude about his long-term prospects for survival and worried that it might be too late to turn his disease around.

When Joe began his treatment with the BaleDoneen Method 14 years ago, we prescribed an evidence-based treatment approach that has been shown in many excellent studies — including large, randomized clinical trials (the gold standard of scientific research) — to save lives by preventing heart attacks, strokes and other devastating complications of CAD. Called "optimal medical therapy" (OMT), it combines an optimal lifestyle with drug therapy to treat arterial disease and the conditions that spark

it, such as high blood pressure, chronic inflammation, and high cholesterol.

OMT has been shown to be just as effective at preventing cardiovascular events and early death from heart-related causes as painful, invasive, and expensive procedures — such as using bypass surgery or stents to restore blood flow to clogged vessels: an approach called revascularization.

Indeed, the scientific evidence supporting OMT is so overwhelming that in 2012, it was formally endorsed in medical guidelines jointly issued by the American Heart Association, the American College of Physicians and other leading medical societies.

**New Proof that Optimal Medical Therapy Works**

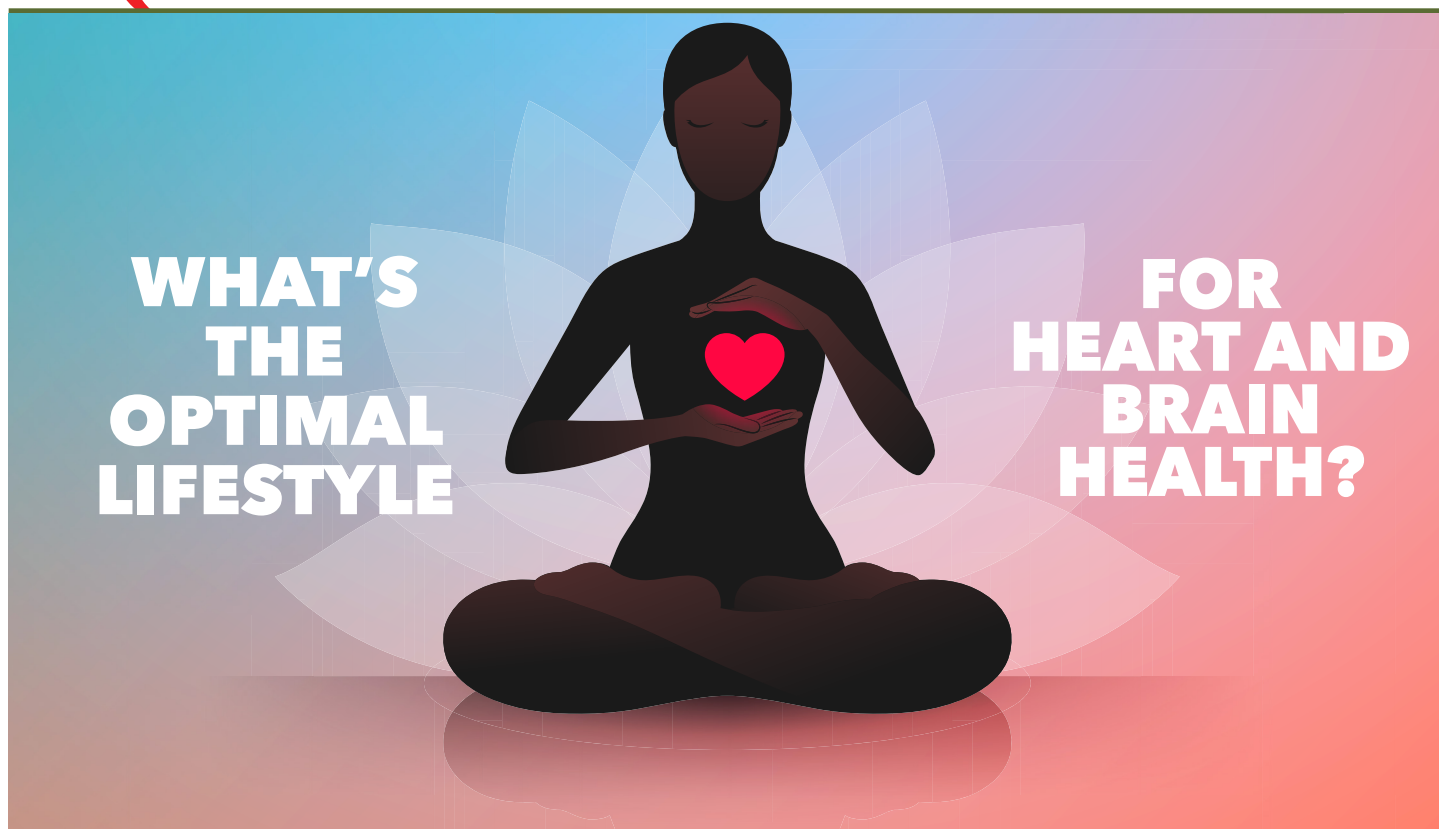
In 2021, a [major clinical trial called SYNTAX](#) reported that OMT dramatically improved long-term survival in patients like Joe, who had undergone revascularization procedures, such as quadruple bypass surgery. Indeed, the study found that patients who received this guideline-recommended treatment, starting soon after their surgery, were 53 percent more likely to be alive ten years later than those who didn't get OMT! The findings were published in *Journal of the American College of Cardiology*.

Conducted by an international team of cardiovascular specialists, the study included 1,472 patients who were tracked for up to 10 years. In an interview with the medical press, one of the study's authors, Dr. Patrick Serruys, stated that the study offered compelling data for providers to tell heart patients that OMT "is the best insurance for his extended survival."

Dr. Serruys and his team defined OMT

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**N**umerous studies have come to the same conclusion: If optimal lifestyle was a medication, it would far outperform every drug on the market by preventing or treating dozens of dangerous disorders, including cardiovascular disease, diabetes, depression, obesity, high blood pressure, chronic inflammation, arthritis and cancer. It can also add years to your life and help keep your arteries young and healthy at every age.

Although most people assume that the key to arterial wellness is getting in better physical shape, the BaleDoneen Method believes that an optimal lifestyle is one that supports and enhances all aspects of your physical, mental and spiritual well-being, allowing you to flourish during your journey to a healthier and happier future. Here's a look at eight easy — and often enjoyable — actions that do your heart and brain good:

***Battle belly fat and keep chronic disease at bay with interval training, aerobics and strength training.***

At every age, keeping fit has numerous health perks, including dramatically reducing your risk for cancer, heart attacks, strokes, diabetes and other chronic illnesses. A recent study found that on average, regular exercisers outlive their sedentary counterparts by seven years! Daily physical activity also helps keep your memory sharp. A study of older adults found that those who kept fit lowered their risk for dementia by 31 percent. The American Heart Association and the BaleDoneen Method advise at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity at least five days a week, plus moderate-to-high-intensity strength training twice a week. *Before starting a new exercise regimen, always check with your provider to make sure it's appropriate for you.*

***Intermittent fasting dials down inflammation, helps heal your gut and burns fat.***

There are a few variations of this popular eating plan, with the most common being the 16/8 approach, which involves fasting every day for about 16 hours and limiting your daily eating to about 8 hours. Within this window, you'll fit in two healthy meals. In a 2021 clinical trial, participants who practiced [intermittent fasting](#) (IF) for eight weeks had significant decreases in body fat, oxidative stress and inflammatory markers, coupled with significant improvements in blood vessel function, food metabolism and gut health, as compared to a control group who are their usual normal diet without any fasting. *Before starting intermittent fasting, always check with your provider since this eating approach is not appropriate for everyone and may be harmful for people with certain medical conditions.*

***Soothe your spirit and defuse stress with mindful meditation or prayer.***

[Mindfulness](#) involves focusing on the present moment in an open, non-judgmental way, while letting stressful thoughts about the past or future drift away. Try sitting quietly for 10 minutes and paying attention to your breathing or a mantra (focus word) as you allow distracting thoughts or worries to drift away like wisps of smoke. Mindfulness has been shown to reduce blood pressure, stress and inflammation. Prayer fosters a similar sense of calm and inner peace, as well as a connection to a higher power. A recent study found that daily prayer is highly effective at reducing stress and anxiety in patients with coronary artery disease — and instilling a sense of hope.

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**Eat an optimal diet based on your DNA to live long and well.**

“Let food be thy medicine,” wrote Hippocrates centuries ago. But which foods should you choose to protect the health of your heart, brain and arteries — and which ones should you avoid? For maximum cardiovascular benefit, the BaleDoneen Method advises an eating plan guided by [your Apo E genotype](#) — which provides insight into whether to follow a very-low fat diet, the conventional Mediterranean-style diet that is widely recommended to protect heart health or a moderate-fat diet that includes heart-healthy oils — and your haptoglobin genotype, which helps you tell if you’d benefit from [going gluten-free](#). We also “prescribe” a daily dose of [dark chocolate](#) (in small amounts) to our patients. Here’s why: In a study of nearly 20,000 people, those who ate an average of 7.5 grams of chocolate (about one small square) daily had a 27 percent lower risk for heart attack and 48 percent drop in stroke danger.

**If you smoke, keep trying to quit until you succeed!**

Every year, nearly 3 million Americans succeed at kicking the nicotine habit — and with the right tactics and support, you can too! A 2021 analysis of studies that included more than 250,000 people found that people who join stop-smoking support programs have a very high success rate, with up to 56 percent of them being smoke free six months later. Researchers also report smokers who try to stop thinking about cigarettes when they’re trying to quit are more likely to backslide, even if the thoughts are about the negative consequences of their habit. The key takeaway is that instead of just focusing on telling yourself not to smoke, it’s much more effective to form healthy new habits. For example, when you get the urge to take a cigarette break, try replacing it with an exercise break (such as a short, brisk walk) several times a day. Also try munching on healthy, crunchy foods, such as carrot or celery sticks, and replacing the “oral gratification” of smoking.

**Sex is safe — and healthy — for most heart patients and an optimal**



PHOTO BY JAMIE MATOCIÑOS ON UNSPLASH

**lifestyle can heighten its pleasure.**

It’s very common for people with arterial disease, particularly those who have already suffered a heart attack or have undergone heart procedures, such as bypass surgery, to worry that engaging in sex might be dangerous. New research, however, shows that sex isn’t just safe for people with heart disease — it can actually enhance their long-term survival, as well as their quality of life! A large study recently reported that staying sexually active helped heart attack survivors live longer, lowered stress levels, improved physical fitness, and contributed to a stronger partner relationship that may enhance quality of life. Adding to the benefits of getting busy between the sheets, the researchers also reported that the more often people had sex after a heart attack, the lower their risk of dying in the next 14 years! That’s right — making love with your significant other can actually save your life!

**Laughter and a spirit of optimism do your heart good.**

One of our favorite bible verses starts, “A merry heart doeth good like medicine” (Proverbs 17:22). Numerous studies bear this out. For example, a 2020 study found that the more you laugh, the less likely you are to have a heart attack, stroke or die from cardiovascular causes. The researchers tracked 17,152 patients for an average of 5.5 years and reported that laughing once or

more a week slashed risk for suffering a cardiovascular event by 40 percent and risk for death from heart-related causes by 50 percent, as compared to laughing less than once a month. We find this and other studies with similar findings so persuasive that we actually “prescribe” laughter to our patients.

**Rev up your brain.**

Like your body, your mind needs exercise to stay fit. Research shows that highly educated people are less likely to suffer memory loss, possibly because keeping the brain active boosts its “cognitive reserve,” allowing it to work efficiently even if some cells are damaged. A wide range of activities provide healthy stimulation: A study of older adults found that those who spent the most time listening to the radio, reading the newspaper, going to museums, and doing puzzles had a 47 percent lower rate of Alzheimer’s disease. More brain-boosters: learning a foreign language, taking courses at a community college and playing games, such as bridge or Scrabble.

**Resources: For more heart-healthy lifestyle ideas, check out these blog posts:**

- [A Delightful Way to Keep Your Body and Brain Fit](#)
- [Eat Smart Tips to Optimize Your Heart and Brain Health](#)
- [Ten Lifestyle Moves that Could Lower Your Dementia Risk by 35 Percent](#)
- [The Habit that Helps Beat the Heart Attack Gene](#)
- [Five Natural Ways to Sleep Better](#)
- [Five Healthy Lifestyle Steps that Lower Stroke Risk 90%](#)