Heart TALK

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

August 2023

Thoughts from Dr. Amy

Photo by Gabrielle Henderson Unsplash

Practicing Gratitude for a Healthier, Happier Heart

We all know that a positive attitude makes us feel better, but can it be beneficial to your health? This month we are delving into a heartwarming topic — the benefits of gratitude and gratitude journaling on cardiovascular health. As we discuss the connection between gratitude and heart health, we will explore the evidence supporting a gratitude journaling practice and how its incorporation into the daily routine can truly lead to a happier heart.

The heart plays a central role in our overall health and well-being. Cardiovascular disease, including heart disease and stroke, remain the leading causes of morbidity and mortality worldwide. However, research suggests that the practice of gratitude may have a positive impact on cardiovascular health, offering an alternative and non-pharmacologic strategy for promoting a healthy cardiovascular system.

The habitual act of intentionally reflecting upon the things for which we are grateful can clearly have a positive impact on both general and cardiovascular health. The practice of gratitude journaling is relatively simple and requires a very modest daily time commitment. To begin a gratitude practice, we suggest the following:

1. Identify your "Journal."
This can be a physical journal, a note on your phone or a word document on your computer. Whatever you choose, stay consistent!

2. Commit to a specific time of day.
This will help to keep you consistent. This can be a lovely way to start your day with a cup of coffee or a nice way to reflect before bedtime.

3. Decide how many things you are going to record each day.
We suggest starting with three. These can be big things such as "the love of my wife," or smaller such as "cream in my coffee."

4. Be as specific as possible.
Being vague in your gratitude list makes it harder to continue the practice. Listing very specific things for which you are grateful can enhance the impact of the practice. For instance, "the smell of ground coffee as I walked down the stairs this morning" is more specific than "coffee."

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Flower Power

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As our gardens explode with fresh fruits and vegetables in these late summer months, it is exciting to gather the fruits of our labor and enjoy fresh, beautiful meals. But what about your gorgeous flowers? Are they just there to provide enjoyment and food for the bees, or do they hold health benefits as well?

Traditional medicine has long held to the belief that edible flowers can provide powerful benefits for cardiovascular, metabolic and mental health. This month, we wanted to focus on several common garden flowers and the research supporting their inclusion in a heart-healthy diet and lifestyle.

For centuries, edible flowers have been used both as garnishes on baked goods and in traditional medicine across various cultures. Not all flowers are safe for human consumption, so it is vital to eat only flowers explicitly labeled as edible from reliable sources.

Common edible flowers and their potential health benefits:

1. HIBISCUS

Hibiscus is perhaps the most well-known of the edible flowers with known cardiovascular benefits, and recent publications have only further supported the health properties of hibiscus. This gorgeous bloom contains several bioactive compounds — such as flavonoids, which have known vasodilatory effects, contributing to improvement in both systolic and diastolic blood pressure. (*Journal of Hypertension*, 2021 and 2015).

Hibiscus is most traditionally consumed in the form of tea, but a number of central American cuisines also incorporate hibiscus flowers in savory dishes such as tacos or quesadillas.

2. CHAMOMILE

Chamomile is best known for its calming and sleep-inducing properties. Research has shown us time and time again that adequate sleep duration and quality has profound impacts on both cardiovascular and metabolic health.

A 2017 study published in *Complementary Therapies in Medicine* reported that use of chamomile extract significantly improved sleep quality among older adults, potentially improving health outcomes while reducing or eliminating the need for more dangerous sleep aids.

3. PANSIES

A review of health benefits of different edible flowers, completed by Lu *et al.*, published in 2016, reported pansies as being high in antioxidants and vitamin C. Pansies may also possess anti-inflammatory properties due to salicylic acid activity (like aspirin).

Pansies are best used as colorful garnishes for desserts and salads.

4. DAHLIAS

Dahlias are having a moment, and it makes us love these colorful blooms even more than we did before! A study recently published in the *Journal of Medicinal Food* (2022) reported an improvement in blood glucose levels with the ingestion of an enzyme (butein) found in the petals of dahlias. The dahlia extract was found to improve insulin sensitivity by reducing brain inflammation and subsequently reduce post-meal blood glucose excursions. Researchers are currently working on extracting the dahlia enzyme into tablet form — ingestion of dahlia petals is not recommended here.

Dahlia extract has also recently been reported to potentially lower inflammatory markers, making this a potential alternative tool aid in the prevention and management of cardiovascular disease and metabolic syndromes (*Journal of Inflammation Research* 2019).

5. LAVENDER

Most of us are familiar with the calming aroma of lavender. Maybe you have used lavender oil in your evening bath or rubbed lavender lotion on your body before bed; the relaxing effect is well acknowledged. However, a 2020 RCT published in *Complementary Therapies in Medicine* reported that the consumption of lavender tea can reduce depression and anxiety scores, suggesting its utility as a complementary therapy for those suffering from these disorders.

Incorporating edible flowers into your culinary repertoire can add a colorful touch to your meals while also providing potential health benefits. Remember to consume only edible flowers marked specifically for consumption and purchased from reputable sources.

August Recipe • Hibiscus Tacos

After learning about the abundant health benefits of hibiscus, you may be looking for ways to start incorporating this super flower into your culinary adventures! Enter: The Hibiscus Taco. This is a concept that I have seen on menus in trendy areas of Mexico and have wanted to try. Now that I have, I wonder why I waited so long! The rehydrated hibiscus flowers mix with warm spices to create an interesting and delicious protein substitute. Top with cilantro, jalapeno, creamy avocado and fresh lime for a fun and special treat!

Photo by Bakd&Raw by Karolin Baitinger

Ingredients

1 cup dried hibiscus flowers
4 cups water
1 tablespoons avocado oil
2 garlic cloves, minced
½ red onion, diced
½ teaspoon cumin
½ teaspoon chili powder
Sea salt to taste (optional)
1 avocado, sliced
Cilantro to garnish (optional)
1 jalapeno chopped (optional)
Squeezed lime to garnish
Cheese of choice (pepper jack, queso fresco or white cheddar all work well here)
4 tortillas of choice (gluten-free if desired!)

Recipe adapted from *Feasting at home* and *alecooks* blogs.

Instructions:

1 Bring water to a boil in medium-sized pot. Add hibiscus flowers, cover and simmer for 5-7 minutes. Remove from heat and leave covered.
2. Prepare garlic, onion, cilantro and jalapeno if using.
3. Drain flowers with colander.
4. Heat skillet over medium-high heat. Add the chopped onion and hibiscus, saute for 2-3 minutes. Lower heat to medium-low and add the garlic, cumin, chili powder and salt to taste.
5. Warm tortillas either on the stovetop or wrapped in a towel in the microwave.
6. Prepare tacos adding hibiscus mixture, avocado, cilantro and jalapeno if using, and top with cheese.
7. Enjoy!

Photo by KT Likes Coffee on Unsplash

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Gratitude journaling, the practice of routinely recording the specific things in life one is thankful for, has recently been the focus of several studies investigating the effects of gratitude on mental and physical health. Findings of these studies include:

1. Decreased inflammation

The Journal of Complementary Medicine published a study in 2022 reporting a correlation between a gratitude practice and reduction in levels of hsCRP. Additionally, a review in the *Journal of Positive Psychology* reported the same findings in 2020

2. Improved heart rate variability

The same study that demonstrated improvement in hsCRP, published in *The Journal of Complementary Medicine*, also found an association between gratitude journaling and heart rate variability, a key indicator of cardiovascular health. Similar results were reported in 2016 in the Journal of Psychosomatic Medicine in a study evaluating the effect of gratitude on health outcomes in those living with Stage B heart failure.

3. Decreased anxiety

Several studies have demonstrated improvement in anxiety symptoms when individuals participated in a gratitude practice.

4. Improved Adherence to Health Behaviors

A 2020 Review published in the Journal of Positive Psychology reported results from 13 studies showing improvement in adherence to health behaviors in participants engaging in a regular gratitude journaling practice.

5. Reduction in blood pressure

A 2018 study published in *Psychosomatic Medicine* reported a correlation between gratitude journaling and decreased systolic blood pressure.

The intentional practice of daily gratitude through gratitude journaling may offer numerous benefits for cardiovascular health, including biomarkers and measurements that we monitor closely at The Prevention Center (hsCRP, blood pressure and levels of stress/anxiety). This simple addition to your health regimen can have a profound impact on both physical and psychological well-being and should be a consideration in any comprehensive plan for cardiovascular disease prevention and wellness.