Whether it’s thinking that wine is healthy so drink up, or that vitamins can overcome an unhealthy lifestyle, here are the 10 most common heart health pitfalls and how to avoid them.

During my 30-plus years in active practice, I repeatedly encountered misguided patients who would twist, ignore, or minimize my recommendations in order to continue with their bad habits and beliefs. All doctors, of course, are challenged by non-compliant patients. However, when you’re dealing with the heart, non-compliance cannot only be detrimental, it can be lethal.

With Heart Health, Make Sure You’re Not Victim to Any of These Ways of Thinking

1. Wine is good for you, so drink up. Scientific research has shown that wine contains all sorts of healthy compounds and is at the heart of the so-called French paradox where despite eating rich, fatty foods and having average cholesterol of 250 the French experience a relatively low level of heart disease. But the French also have the highest incidence of cirrhosis of the liver in the world. So again, moderation is the name of the game. Keep it to one glass of wine, three or four times a week.

2. Seeing “low-calorie” on a food label means it’s healthy. Listed among the ingredients of many so-called healthy low calorie foods is sugar, high-fructose corn syrup, or other unneeded sweeteners. That’s especially true if the product is low-fat since many manufacturers unwittingly replace sugar for fat. The body responds by storing the excess non-metabolized sugar calories as fat. So be sure to scour package labels for the sugar content.

3. Smoking has some virtues. Even after they had a heart attack, some of my patients continued to smoke. They had all kinds of excuses to justify their behavior, such as “it relaxes me,” “it takes the edge off,” or “it takes away my appetite so I eat less and lose weight.” I’ve even had men tell me they enjoy smoking cigars but don’t inhale. Second-hand smoke, of course, can be harmful, and pleasurable mouthfuls of smoke, even if not ultimately inhaled, mean that toxic chemicals, pesticides, and insecticides are being absorbed into the bloodstream. Smoking kills, period.

4. A few extra pounds can’t hurt. I frequently saw patients who were maybe 10 or 20 pounds heavier than they should have been, but did not think of themselves as overweight. I also counseled those who believed that in order to make a real difference in their health, they had to lose a lot of weight. But by losing even a few pounds you reduce abdominal fat, which is a major source of potentially-damaging inflammatory chemicals. Lowering your body weight by just 10 percent can bring down your blood pressure numbers and reduce your risk for type
2 diabetes. So when it comes to weight loss, keep in mind that a little means a lot.

5. No pain, no gain. Getting patients to exercise is a challenge for every doctor. That’s because most people mistakenly believe that they must sweat buckets and really feel the burn in order to reap the health benefits associated with exercise. But living at the gym, hoisting monster weights, or logging endless miles on the treadmill are certainly not required for a healthy heart. You just have to move regularly. Reframe the idea of exercise in terms of activities you can incorporate into your lifestyle, such as walking the dog, walking and talking with friends, gardening, or going square dancing. It’s all exercise and it’s good for your heart and the rest of your body.

6. Oil is oil. Many patients set themselves up for potential health problems by cooking with the wrong oils, namely canola, peanut, corn, and sunflower. The problem is that these oils oxidize rapidly with heat and the resultant chemical transformations can have a serious impact on your heart health. Omega-6 oils like canola, corn, and vegetable are also pro-inflammatory, versus olive oil which is anti-inflammatory. But even heart-healthy extra virgin olive oil oxidizes fairly easily and therefore is not the best option for most cooking. So save it for drizzling onto vegetables and salads, and instead use a light olive oil for cooking at low temperatures for shorter periods of time, such as sautéing. For other cooking I recommend coconut oil, a saturated fat that’s least vulnerable to oxidative deterioration from heat.

7. Saturated fat is something to be feared. Patients often avoid foods containing saturated fats, such as meat, eggs, nuts, and butter, fearing that saturated fat turns into cholesterol in the body, which then promotes heart disease. Eggs have probably taken the biggest hit because of this cholesterol fear, and that’s a shame. Cage-free, DHA-fortified organic eggs are a perfect protein and can be eaten quite frequently, up to six a week. Plus, foods high in saturated fat are beneficial for LDL cholesterol, helping to change your cholesterol pattern from small, dense, harmful particles into large, fluffy, harmless ones. Plus, saturated fats raise “good” HDL cholesterol.

8. We are born meat eaters. Type O is the most common type of blood, and, according to the popular blood-type diet, those with this common blood type are best suited for eating meat. Yet I’ve often reminded ultra-carnivore patients about a Japanese researcher-gastroenterologist who had conducted some 300,000 colonoscopies during his career and found that cancer of the bowels was directly related to eating meat. That’s because meat doesn’t have gut-cleaning fiber. Without fiber, meat remains in the gut too long and putrefies. Moreover, if meat isn’t organic, you have insecticides and pesticides being absorbed as well. I follow the 80/20 rule when it comes to meat. That means 80 percent of the diet should be vegetables, fruit, and non GMO gluten-free grains with fiber, and 20 percent meat. Again, it’s all about balance.

9. Vitamins alone will protect me. A lot of people think they can eat anything they want as long as they take nutritional supplements. One patient I had stands out in my mind. He was a middle-aged professional man who came to see me just before going on a cruise. “Hey doc,” he said, “now that I’m taking your CoQ10 and other pills, I can eat anything I want, right?” Wrong. Yes, supplements are protective. But they are not a license for eating poorly and consuming too many calories. You can easily overwhelm their positive effect with a nutrient-poor, calorie-laden diet.

10. An aspirin a day keeps the cardiologist away. Practically every new patient I saw thought they should be taking an aspirin a day to protect their cardiovascular health. It is true that if you have coronary artery disease, an aspirin is beneficial in order to keep the blood thin. I don’t like or believe in aspirin for primary prevention.
There are other natural blood thinners, such as omega-3 fatty acids and nattokinase that should be used first. Unlike aspirin, these blood-thinning alternatives don’t carry a risk for excessive bleeding. I saw many new patients taking aspirin for primary prevention who had symptoms of aspirin side effects, including overt bruising and gastrointestinal bleeding. I got them to kick that habit in a hurry.