

# 20 risks for heart disease you didn't know you had

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By now, pretty much everyone is familiar with the classic risk factors for heart disease: smoking, poor diet, Type A personality, sedentary lifestyle, obesity, family history, diabetes, high blood pressure, too much “bad cholesterol,” inflammation.

But less well known are these 20 surprising potential heart hazards, some of which seem totally counterintuitive.



## 1) Diet soda

Feel virtuous now that you've switched from sugar-laden sodas, bottled teas, and juice drinks to no-cal alternatives? Think again. Researchers have already noted that, unexpectedly, swapping sugary beverages for artificially sweetened alternatives does not help dieters lose weight.

Now, a new study just presented at the American College of Cardiology's annual meeting shows that women who consumed at least two diet sodas per week were 30 percent more likely to suffer heart problems than women who rarely consumed sugarless fizzy drinks.

Whatever you make of the association, it's pretty clear that drinking no-cal drinks didn't seem to help women in this study avert heart problems.

## 2) Your car

Your car may be killing you. Auto commuters traversing more than 30 miles daily suffer from more stress, high blood pressure and heart disease. They also die younger, according to a study by social geographer Erika Sandow from Sweden's Umeå University.

Why? It may be the aggravation of traffic snafus; the inhaled, artery-damaging road pollutants probably don't help; plus, all that time spent sitting is a risk in itself (see # 11 later).

## 3) Over-the-counter pain medication

NSAIDs – nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (e.g. Advil, Motrin, Aleve) – are notorious for causing stomach bleeding. But unlike heart-protective aspirin, they actually may make the blood more prone to clotting, raising the risks of heart attacks and strokes.

Additionally, sometimes this class of drugs can cause the kidneys to retain water,

boosting blood pressure.

The good news is these medications mostly raise heart risks in people who already have well-established heart disease – ordinary folks are less affected.

#### **4) Whole wheat bread**

In general, high-fiber whole grains are considered heart-healthy, unless you O.D. on pasta and bagels and you're carbohydrate-sensitive. But a new study reveals that if you have celiac disease, consuming gluten can double your heart disease risk.

#### **5) Vegetable oil**

Influential sites like [health.gov](http://health.gov) and heart.org keep urging us to "Choose a diet low in fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol ... Vegetable oils supply smaller amounts of saturated fat ... unsaturated fats reduce blood cholesterol when they replace saturated fats in the diet."

But a new study casts doubt on these recommendations. Researchers discovered that when conscientious eaters followed standard recommendations to substitute saturated fats with vegetable oils, their heart risk didn't decrease – it increased.

#### **6) Ultra-endurance sports**

Exercise is good for the heart. But new thinking is emerging about relentless training for marathons, ultra-marathons, and Iron Man competitions. Some studies have shown a trend toward heart enlargement and cardiac arrhythmias among high-intensity competitors; others point to cumulative damage to heart muscles due to mild, unnoticed heart attacks after strenuous exertion.

Worst of all, very high levels of athleticism are not a perfect bulwark against atherosclerosis. Even fit marathoners have sometimes been found to have significant amounts of coronary calcium deposits.

#### **7) Snoring**

Excessive snoring may be a tip-off that you have sleep apnea. Characterized by frequent bouts of oxygen starvation due to impaired breathing, sleep apnea can raise blood pressure and damage heart muscle. To find out if you have sleep apnea, ask for a sleep study called a polysomnography.

#### **8) Being single**

OK, you thought you were avoiding the aggravation of domestic strife? Think again. A new study shows that, for people 50 and under, being married reduces risk from all vascular diseases by 12%. If you're over 50, no worries: being single poses minimal

risk.

## 9) Noise

Did the realtor neglect to tell you that your new home lies directly in the flight path of incoming jumbo jets? Excessive noise triggers elevations of stress hormones such as cortisol, adrenaline, and noradrenaline that can lead to hypertension, stroke, and heart failure.

## 10) Low blood pressure

Isn't it high blood pressure that leads to heart disease? Well, conversely, if your blood pressure is too low, heart problems can result. This is particularly the case for older individuals whose doctors overzealously prescribe blood pressure meds. When blood pressure is too low, there's a danger blood vessels won't fill properly, and the heart is starved of its blood supply.

## 11) Sitting too much

We spend entirely too much of our time sitting – over nine hours per day, on average. It's not just the absence of exercise – too much sitting even poses risks to those who work out. Prolonged sitting – as on long plane flights – thickens the blood and predisposes to blood clots.

If you've got a sedentary job, make a point of giving that certain part of your anatomy frequent walk breaks.

## 12) TV

On a related note, there are an awful lot of great sports events and new cable series to watch. That means plenty of sitting. Worse, TV doesn't really relax you, it induces a chronic adrenalized state; it's also associated with sleep deprivation and impulsive snacking. Watching TV two hours per day or more ups your risk for fatal or non-fatal heart disease by 15%.

## 13) Antidepressants

While untreated chronic depression is a known risk factor for heart attacks, certain antidepressants may pose heart dangers. This is true for old-fashioned tricyclic anti-depressants like Elavil, but also for newer SSRIs like Celexa and Lexapro, and the non-SSRI Wellbutrin.

## 14) Racism

The poor and racial minorities are known to experience higher rates of heart disease. Some of that is undoubtedly due to poor diet, bad habits, the stress of

poverty, and lack of access to decent medical care.

But controversial research highlights racism itself as a contributor to heart disease. Harvard investigators believe that conditions of chronic stress, commonly found among American blacks and other racial minorities, **may be associated** with “greater cardiovascular reactivity” – a clear risk factor for heart disease.

### **15) Your iron supplement**

It has been postulated that the reason women get heart disease later than men is because they menstruate, leaving them less at risk for iron overload until menopause, when they gradually catch up with their male peers.

A certain percentage of the population carries a gene that helps the body hoard iron. They are easily prone to iron overload. Excess iron damages the organs, including the pancreas, liver, brain and heart.

Therefore, unless you’ve had your iron levels evaluated, don’t automatically take iron supplements on the theory that they might reinvigorate your “tired blood.”

### **16) Quitting coffee**

OK, so you thought that giving up coffee would help your heart? That’s what we used to think. New evidence shows that the beneficial polyphenols that give coffee and tea their distinct bitter taste and aroma also protect the arteries.

These polyphenols are present in decaffeinated brews, but kicking caffeine may not be essential to reap coffee’s heart benefits. While it’s true that some susceptible individuals experience blood pressure and heart rate surges with excess caffeine, and certain brew methods promote high cholesterol, studies show that moderate amounts of caffeinated coffee consumption still deliver cardiovascular benefits

### **17) Bikram yoga**

Yoga is heart-healthy, but over-strenuous contortions in a super-heated environment can prompt heart problems in at-risk individuals. Spanish cardiologists **recently reported** a rare case of a heart attack brought on by a hot yoga session.

### **18) Binge drinking in your younger years**

While moderate alcohol consumption protects the heart, binge-drinking while young may have lasting adverse consequences.

### **19) Pulling all-nighters**

Chronobiology is the study of how shifts in our circadian rhythms affect our health. It turns out that Ben Franklin’s adage, “Early to bed, early to rise makes a man healthy” is true; disruption of your regular day-night cycle with shift work, all-

nighters, or frequent time-zone changes can put your heart into a tailspin.

## **20) Your dermatologist's advice**

"Cover up!" "Slather on the SPF 50!" These well-intentioned warnings may be good for your skin, but skimping on sun may cause vitamin D deficiency, which is associated with heart disease risk. Get tested for 25-hydroxy vitamin D, and if yours is low, raise it with judicious sunlight exposure and some vitamin D3 supplements.