

Andrew Weil, MD

self healing

CREATING OPTIMUM HEALTH FOR YOUR BODY AND SOUL

Which New Heart Test Is Right for You?

Regular cholesterol tests can play an important role in determining your heart disease risk. Yet studies show that over half of all first heart attacks occur in people with normal cholesterol levels. As research continues to deepen our understanding of heart disease, new tools have emerged to help improve risk assessment and detection. Below, I'll highlight three of the latest tests and, along with Chicago-based integrative cardiologist Stephen DeVries, MD, evaluate them.

CRP: C-reactive protein is a blood marker for inflammation in the body. An elevated CRP level may indicate a higher heart disease risk (in women it's a better predictor than LDL cholesterol). Some cardiologists regard this inexpensive blood test as helpful in determining treatment for borderline patients—those at moderate risk. Others feel it's less useful, saying it can't distinguish between acute inflammation (caused by an infection, for example) and chronic inflammation linked to cardiovascular disease. Due to a lack of evidence, the American Heart Association has recommended CRP testing only for those at moderate risk.


Bottom line: Dr. DeVries believes the CRP test is valuable. "Clearly, inflammation plays a role in heart disease, and tests like CRP can pick up problems beyond the traditional cholesterol screen," he says. Likewise, I think checking CRP levels should become part of the routine screenings for everyone, not just one risk group.

Coronary calcification scan: Also known as electron-beam computed tomography (EBCT), this noninvasive test involves lying on a table inside a doughnut-shaped scanner. Images are analyzed to detect calcium deposits, which can narrow and harden arteries—a condition known as atherosclerosis. A high calcium score indicates the presence of coronary calcification

and a greater likelihood of a cardiovascular event. This news can motivate some patients to make lifestyle changes. On the other hand, a low score may give others a false sense of security. The test cannot detect all forms of atherosclerosis, and since there is limited research on its effectiveness, most health insurers don't cover it.


Bottom line: As Dr. DeVries says, normal results are not always accurate and abnormal results are not conclusive. Skip it unless you have a few risk factors, in which case it may be helpful along with other tests in gauging the extent of risk.

64-slice CT scan: Like the coronary calcification scan, this test involves lying on a table inside a scanner for 15 minutes. Multiple (64!) snapshots are taken to create a three-dimensional image of the heart "in action." The image is sensitive enough to detect narrowed arteries and the presence of fatty deposits without subjecting patients to an invasive angiogram. Yet this test is not for everyone. Drawbacks include exposure to dye and radiation, plus most health insurance companies don't cover it.

Bottom line: For patients with chest pain or a mildly abnormal stress test, the scan can help determine the need for further invasive testing. Otherwise, I think the costs outweigh the benefits. 

TIPS

FOR LIVING WELL

- Go ahead and have **chocolate** every day. Eating just a quarter ounce of dark chocolate a day lowered systolic and diastolic blood pressure without increasing weight or other health risks.
- Get more out of your **workout** by taking a short break. Men who cycled for 30 minutes, rested for 20 minutes, and then pedaled for another 30 minutes boosted their metabolism more than when they exercised for an hour straight.
- An easier and healthier way to **grocery-shop:** Use the 5 and 20 rule to read food labels. Look for 5 percent or less of the Daily Value of saturated fat, sodium, and cholesterol, and 20 percent of vitamins, fiber, and calcium.
- Go heavy on the **broccoli:** Eating it more than once a week can slash a man's risk of aggressive prostate cancer by about 50 percent. (Cauliflower counts, too.)
- Group cardio-fitness classes can improve **depression** symptoms in women when antidepressant medication doesn't work, one small study suggests. 

INSIDE	Health in the News	2
	Should Calories Be on Menus?	3
	Easy Afternoon Pick-Me-Ups	3
	Best Foods for Your Eyes	4
	A Vitamin and Mineral Checklist	5
	Easing Chronic Pain	6
	Q&A: Snoring; Kelp; & More	7
	Consumer Watch: Alli; Sun Pills	8

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HEALTH IN THE NEWS

For Heart Health, Ditch the Daily Soda

Drinking even one diet or regular soft drink a day may lead to conditions associated with cardiovascular disease and diabetes. Researchers looked at data from more than 9,000 middle-aged men and women collected over four years and concluded that those who drank one or more sodas a day had a nearly 50 percent greater risk of developing metabolic syndrome, a cluster of risk factors including a large waist circumference, high blood pressure, elevated triglycerides, low levels of HDL ("good") cholesterol, and high blood sugar levels. (*Circulation*, July 2007)

MY TAKE ▶ I'm not surprised that soda contributes to metabolic syndrome, though the small amount required to see the effect is shocking. We know that high-fructose corn syrup, found in regular sodas, is a prime suspect in metabolic syndrome. The artificial sweeteners in diet sodas, the caramel added to soft drinks, and the substitution of sodas for healthier beverages may also play a role.

Obesity May Be Contagious

Having a spouse, friend, or family member who becomes obese may raise your risk of following in their footsteps. An analysis of 32 years' worth of obesity data on more than 12,000 people suggests that someone's chance of becoming obese increases by 57 percent if he or she has a friend who becomes obese, 40 percent if it's a sibling, and 37 percent if it's a spouse. Researchers also found that when someone lost weight and was no longer obese, friends and family tended to lose weight too. (*New England Journal of Medicine*, July 26, 2007)

MY TAKE ▶ Obesity is becoming so common that it's often seen as normal. The good news from this study is that healthy habits seem to be contagious as well.

Protect Your Knees with Vitamin C

Eating a diet rich in vitamin C and other antioxidants may lower the odds of developing osteoarthritis of the knee, report Australian researchers. At the study's start, 293 middle-aged adults—all free of knee pain—filled out dietary questionnaires. Ten years later, their knees were examined using MRI scans. People with higher dietary levels of vitamin C were less likely to have bone abnormalities that contribute to knee arthritis. Intake of fruit (a prime source of vitamin C) and dietary levels of the carotenoids lutein and zeaxanthin (both found in green vegetables) were also linked to better bone health. (*Arthritis Research & Therapy*, July 6, 2007)

MY TAKE ▶ Vitamin C is necessary for the synthesis of connective tissue, including cartilage. The exact protective role of antioxidants here isn't clear, but it's a good idea to get plenty of them, for their health-protective effects.

Echinacea Does Fight Colds

Although some recent research has questioned the effectiveness of echinacea against colds, a new analysis of trials concludes that the herb helps prevent colds and reduces its symptoms. Researchers pooled data from 14 studies involving 1,630 adults and children who had been randomly assigned to take echinacea or a placebo. Echinacea reduced the risk of catching a cold by 58 percent and shaved nearly 1.5 days off the duration of a cold. (*Lancet Infectious Diseases*, July 2007)

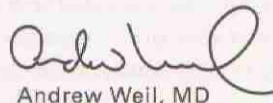
MY TAKE ▶ This is great news that I hope reduces—rather than adds to—confusion about echinacea. There's good evidence for products made with the above-ground parts of *Echinacea purpurea*, so check labels. I suggest taking one teaspoon four times a day at the first sign of cold symptoms. If you are around someone with a cold, taking echinacea for a few days may help prevent you from catching it.

Should Calories Be on Restaurant Menus?

You may soon find something new on in-store and drive-through menu boards at some fast-food restaurants—the number of calories per serving. On July 1, a New York City law went into effect requiring mostly chain restaurants and fast-food outlets to post calorie counts next to food prices, although it won't be enforced until October. Also in July, the King County (Washington) Board of Health approved a similar law—to take effect next summer—that will also require chain restaurants to display calorie, fat, sodium, and carbohydrate information on printed menus.

All told, approximately 20 states, cities, and counties are currently considering menu-labeling legislation or regulations to help consumers make better-informed choices and to stem rising rates of obesity. But the new measures don't come without controversy: Although some restaurant chains in New York City (including Subway) are already complying with the law there, others are refusing to change their menu boards, and the state restaurant association has filed a lawsuit against the city, calling the regulation unconstitutional. The city's health department shot back, "It is unfortunate that some restaurants are so ashamed of what they are serving the public that they would rather go to court than share this information with their customers."

I favor nutrition labeling at all restaurants, including calories, nutrient (carbohydrate, fat, and protein) breakdowns, and fiber and sodium content. You may not go to McDonald's for health food, but did you know its grilled chicken club sandwich has more calories (570) than a Big Mac (540)? That's largely because the chicken club weighs about 20 percent more.



Andrew Weil, MD

That's a Mouthful

In one study, dietitians estimated that a typical meal of a hamburger and onion rings in a sit-down restaurant would have 865 calories. It actually contained 1,550.

MIND-BODY WELLNESS

Easy Pick-Me-Ups for an Afternoon Slump

Many people experience an energy plunge in the afternoon: The morning caffeine buzz has worn off, and blood sugar levels may bottom out a few hours after lunch. Besides eating a healthy snack (like a handful of raw nuts), here are three more ways to recharge your body and reawaken your mind when you have an energy shortage.

Breathe for Energy

When I feel tired during the day, I'll take a short nap, go for a walk, or practice the Stimulating Breath. This quick pick-me-up works faster than drinking a cup of coffee: Sit with your back straight and place the tip of your tongue against the ridge of tissue behind your upper front teeth. Keep it there throughout the exercise. Inhale and exhale rapidly through your nose, with your mouth lightly closed. Your breaths in and out should be equal in duration, but as short as possible. Try this for 15 seconds to start. Then add 5 seconds each time you do the exercise, until you reach one minute. You should feel muscular effort at the base of your neck above the collarbones and at the diaphragm (touch these spots to get a sense of movement). Afterward, you may feel revived the way you would after a good workout.

Shake Sleepiness Off

To fight fatigue, try movement and a little laughter. Laughing gets your body moving, makes you breathe harder, and also helps you to let go of physical and emotional tension that can easily sap your energy, says Jeffrey Brantley, MD, director of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Program at the Duke Center for Integrative Medicine and coauthor of *Five Good Minutes at Work* (New Harbinger, 2007). He suggests first taking a moment to acknowledge feelings of stress and paying attention to where stress and weariness seem strongest in your body. Then, whether standing, sitting, or lying down, let your body start to move and gently shake where you feel the most tense. As you shake, add some fun and surprising sounds to the movement, such as laughter. You'll loosen up your body and your smile.

Splash Fatigue Away

Your mind may feel overloaded and your body tense after the first part of the day, so it's important to clear the morning's effects and start fresh in the afternoon, says Ann Marie Chiasson, MD, an Arizona-based integrative physician and energy-medicine practitioner. She suggests splashing cool water on your face and the back of your neck and washing your hands. Imagine the water washing away tension and fatigue. Afterward, replenish energy by moving your body for 5 to 10 minutes. She advises going for a short walk or practicing this qigong pose: Stand with your knees bent and feet shoulder length apart, then gently bounce up and down. Tap firmly with closed fists on your lower abdomen (two to four inches below the bellybutton), which is considered the body's core energy center. 