

YOUR GOOD HEALTH

Need a break?

A vacation really can be good for you - if it's done right

By American Heart Association News

Need another reason to take that vacation? How about this: It's probably good for your heart and mind.

Research over the years has suggested that holidays - and breaking away from a stressful daily routine - reap more than just scenic photos and souvenirs.

One of the most-cited studies, the Multiple Risk Factor Intervention Trial published in 2000, tracked middle-age men for nine years and concluded those who had taken more annual vacations were less likely to die from cardiovascular causes, including heart attacks. Other surveys and studies have linked vacations to less depression, decreased stress and better overall well-being.

Dr. Anand Rohatgi, a preventive cardiologist and associate professor of medicine at UT Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas, said more research is needed on the subject, but the idea makes sense.

"These are mostly observational studies, but people who take less vacation are typically more stressed and have more health issues," he said. "If you don't take the time to recover and restore, you're not going to perform as well, and you may be more prone to injury and inflammation and illness."

One barrier to drawing definitive conclusions, he said, is the difficulty in separating the vacation issue from every other factor affecting health.

"People who choose to have or are able to have more vacation may be different from people who can't," Rohatgi said. "It may be related to job status or financial status, not just about the vacation itself."

Nevertheless, the cardiologist said he counsels patients, especially those with heart problems, to reduce their stress, with time off as part of that strategy.

"Stress can raise your blood pressure, it can raise your pulse, it can lead to arrhythmia or make any of those conditions worse,



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and make them harder to manage," Rohatgi said. "There are clear cardiovascular implications of maintaining balance and diminishing stress. You need to do that on some level on a daily basis, but vacations are a nice way to fully unplug and disengage."

Fully unplugging is the key.

"You need to use that vacation properly," Rohatgi said. "Even when you do take time off, you can still be on your screen with constant phone calls and email. Spending time somewhere else but still checking in all the time may diminish the value you think you're getting."

What you do - and how you eat - can make a difference. A sabbatical with lots of fresh air and vigorous hikes may have a healthier impact than an unlimited food-and-drink cruise or replenishing the cola and chips at every gas stop.

"Sometimes we have a tendency to go away and feel it's all or nothing," said Andrea D'Ambrosio, a dietitian and nutrition coach in Kitchener, Ontario. "We tell ourselves, 'I can't have it at home but when I go away there's unlimited drinks and buffets so I'm just going to gorge myself.'"

"The goal is to try to make your vacation similar to your normal eating habits." For example, she said, maintain regularly scheduled meals four to six hours apart and pack healthy snacks "so you're not overhungry at any given time."

Even so, D'Ambrosio knows food is a cherished part of any vacation.

"If you go to Italy, enjoy the pasta and the wine," she said. But she also advises keeping a healthy balance and limiting liquid calories "because they're sneaky. We're more likely to consume liquid calories like alcohol and sugary beverages than food calories."

Home or away, experts agree moderation should be the theme.

"Vacations are just part of the total holistic package" for health, Rohatgi said. "Managing stress and diet and exercise are always going to be key."

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