

Tall Tales of the Heart

Over the years, I've heard some pretty wacky theories about what causes heart disease. Here's the truth.

By Arthur Agatston, M.D., Prevention

Every day, patients ask my opinion about various treatments and remedies they've found on the Internet. Just as there are stories about mammoth alligators lurking in Manhattan's sewers, urban legends regarding [heart disease](#) and what causes it abound. Here are the verdicts on a few I've heard lately:

You can stop a heart attack by coughing. True.

Coughing alternately increases and decreases chest pressure, which can raise a slow heart rate, boost cardiac output, and sometimes even stop an arrhythmia. It's called "cough CPR." If you have coronary disease and feel palpitations and are lightheaded, take deep breaths and cough repeatedly. This may support your circulation a bit longer until help arrives.

Learn how to [lower your heart attack risk](#) from the experiences of other patients.

Roller coasters are dangerous for your heart. True.

That's why there are all those warning signs at Walt Disney World. If you have a [heart condition](#), any thrill ride can trigger a rush of adrenaline that could cause an irregular heartbeat and even a coronary. People with heart disease should stick to It's a Small World.

The higher your cholesterol, the greater your chance of heart disease. Sort of true.

Total cholesterol tells us which populations have higher risks of heart attack. For example, Americans' average cholesterol levels are much higher than those of the Chinese, and we have a much higher rate of heart attack. However, if you look at the population of this country alone, total cholesterol is a very poor predictor of [heart disease risk](#). Studies show that total cholesterol levels among people who've had heart attacks are almost the same as those of people who haven't. You have to look at the types of cholesterol (HDL, LDL) and their size. These are the most helpful measurements.

You're at risk of a heart attack if there's a crease in your earlobe. Perhaps.

This phenomenon is something I look for and have observed in patients. Some studies show that if you have a pronounced crease running diagonally across one or more lobes, your body's level of elastin is low. Elastin is a protein that affects blood vessel function. It's particularly abundant in your largest artery, the aorta.

The balder the man, the greater his heart attack risk. Probably false.

Balding is triggered in a roundabout way by high levels of testosterone. High testosterone levels are good for a man's sex drive and for lean muscles and good bone mass, but low testosterone levels are associated with prediabetes and type 2 diabetes, both risk factors for heart disease. Although some earlier studies have suggested an association between baldness and heart disease, more recent ones refute the notion.

Follow Dr. Agatston's [6 tips for a healthy heart](#).

You're probably a bit surprised that so many of these supposed urban legends have an element of truth to them. But keep in mind that even though there may be some science there, it's soft science. Cardiologists routinely do so many tests to assess heart disease risk that oddball theories like these, even if partially true, become relatively minor. Now, about those alligators ...

Arthur Agatston, M.D., an associate professor of medicine at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine, is the author of The South Beach Diet Supercharged: Faster Weight Loss and Better Health for Life. He maintains a cardiology practice and research foundation in Miami Beach, Fla.

Good news for your heart

Read Agatston's blog for the latest advice and ask him questions at prevention.com/dragatston.

<http://health.msn.com/health-topics/heart-and-cardiovascular/articlepage.aspx?cp-documentid=100249952>