



# The Heart Attack That Could Have Killed Me Made Me Stronger When I Turned to a Whole-Food, Plant-Based Diet

By Doug Schmidt  
2017-08-10 15:09:30



It was Memorial Day 2008. The pain in my chest took me to the ground. I rolled over on my back and hoped it would subside. After a few minutes it did, and I resumed walking around the yard. Seconds later I doubled over with pain in my chest and back. What was going on? After a visit to the emergency room, I was put in an ambulance and sent to another hospital (the first was short-staffed due to the holiday weekend). I was rushed into emergency surgery. Afterward doctors told me, “You had a blockage in your LAD (left anterior descending artery), also called ‘the widow-maker.’ We put in a stent.”

I was now classified with coronary artery disease at age 49. I later discovered how fortunate I had been. Ninety percent of people who suffer an LAD heart attack don’t make it. I was part of the lucky 10 percent. I was told I would be on heart medication for the rest of my life. My cardiologist would see me once a year. He said I could eat four eggs per week and that I should stick to lean meats. He didn’t say anything else about altering my diet.

I decided to take matters into my own hands with the help of a wonderful general practitioner. My research led me to *Prevent and Reverse Heart Disease* by Caldwell B. Esselstyn Jr., MD. Still, I thought that it would be too extreme to give up all the food I enjoyed. I would just cut back on meat and that would be good enough.

## Half Measures and Full Portions

Part of my hesitation to fully embrace a complete dietary switch was the fact that I am a foodie by past trade, and I love cooking and eating. I used to develop new bakery items for a leading grocery store chain. I can make anything from babka and croissants to zabaglione. I would eat wheels of Brie for an appetizer. I made beef Wellington to impress guests. I was active hiking the Adirondacks on the weekends and constantly on the go, but I wasn’t healthy and was easily 60 pounds overweight. Prior to my widow-maker, however, I had never been diagnosed with high blood pressure or high cholesterol, so I thought an incremental approach would work just fine.

Wrong. A year later I had a scare that sent me right back to the operating room. Doctors did another angiogram but determined that I had *only* 60 percent blockages, so we would just have to wait and see how it went. They said I needed 70 percent blockages to warrant another stent. That was not very reassuring.

After that, my wife and I worked hard to change to a whole-food, plant-based diet with no oil, beginning a journey to explore the healthiest way to eat to save my heart and get me off of as many medications as possible. I can’t say it was easy. Altering eating habits ingrained from birth is one of the hardest things to do. What kept us on the path in pursuit of our goal was each

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August 10 2017

other—and finding recipes that not only tasted good but replaced comfort foods. We looked for new, flavorful dishes we could make at home that we'd crave and enjoy.

## Multicultural Munching

I think the hardest thing for Americans is, “What do you do with vegetables?” Vegetables have always been considered a side dish in American cuisine. So we looked to cultures that use vegetables (along with whole grains and legumes) as their main ingredient: Asian dishes, African dishes, Indian dishes, Arab dishes. Our taste buds changed as we modified our diet. We were exposed to different spices and fell in love with new tastes and flavors.

Each week we aim to try a new recipe. Last night we made sweet potato wraps with baked falafel and homegrown broccoli sprouts. We love to experiment with different vegetable soups, like Italian wedding soup with bean balls. We have a power oats breakfast bowl every morning with fresh berries and a side of steamed kale drizzled with maple balsamic vinegar. And we love Buddha bowls. One-pot meals are so easy and delicious.

Now, eight years after my second trip to the emergency room, I am off of all medications—not even a daily aspirin—and I am more than 55 pounds lighter. I feel like I have found the fountain of youth. I am the leanest I have been since high school, and I have the energy of a teenager. I just finished my second half-marathon at age 58. Needless to say, I will be eating this way for the rest of my life. I hope to live to 100!

