

## CONVERSATIONS

# Dr. Heather Shenkman, Interventional Cardiologist Advocating for Dietary Supplements

Interview by Sheldon Baker

**Heather Shenkman, MD**, is a board certified interventional cardiologist who completed a six year program at Albany Medical College, graduating at the age of 23. She completed her residency at Henry Ford Hospital, cardiology fellowship at the University of Rochester, and interventional cardiology fellowship at the esteemed Tufts Medical Center in Boston. Currently, she is the chief of cardiology at Valley Presbyterian Hospital in Los Angeles, and on staff at Providence Cedars Sinai Tarzana Medical Center. She also maintains a solo practice.

Dr. Shenkman wanted to be a doctor since she was a child and was drawn to cardiology because heart disease is a leading cause of death globally and so much of it is avoidable and treatable. While she is trained to perform complex heart surgeries, she prefers to help patients promote heart health and reduce the risk of heart disease. Her passion is to help people improve their quality of life through a preventative care approach.

As an interventional cardiologist, she has a strong appreciation for and understanding of the benefit that a healthy lifestyle provides for cardiovascular conditions. According to Dr. Shenkman, you can promote cardiovascular health and avoid many heart conditions from returning by incorporating a healthy diet, regular exercise, stress management and natural healing into your daily life. (*Altern Ther Health Med*. 2025;31(6):6-8).

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**Alternative Therapies in Health and Medicine (ATHM):** You are an interventional cardiologist. What does that mean?

**Heather Shenkman, MD:** An interventional cardiologist is a cardiologist who is capable of doing invasive procedures that can help the heart or save a patient's life. In particular, I think the most critical of the procedures that I do is what's called an angioplasty which involves opening up a blocked artery of the heart. That's something that's particularly critical for

somebody who's having a heart attack because a heart attack involves an artery that's acutely blocked off and blood flow is not getting to portions of the heart. When we can open up an artery with that type of procedure, we can literally save a patient's life.

**ATHM:** How long have you been practicing?

**Dr. Shenkman:** Oh, my goodness. I finished my interventional cardiology fellowship training in 2007. So that means I've been practicing for 18 years.

**ATHM:** Are you affiliated with a hospital or a university?

**Dr. Shenkman:** I am the chief of cardiology at Valley Presbyterian Hospital in Los Angeles, and I'm on staff at Providence Cedars Sinai Tarzana Medical Center. I also have a solo practice. Let me add a little more about who I am and how I came into the space of being more in integrative and lifestyle medicine and supporting cardiologist.

I've been a vegetarian and vegan for about 20 years, but also somebody who, as an adult, took on athletics and triathlon competition. I started competing in triathlons at age 30. I've since done many triathlons and marathons. I have completed two Ironman distance triathlons. I slowed down with that a little when my daughter was born a few years back, but I'm starting to get back into it as I approach age 50. I'm actually going to be doing a half Ironman distance trail race this summer. I'm somebody who still, even if I'm not necessarily competing in things, somebody who's very active. I exercise five days a week, and I try to set a good example for my patients encouraging them to get out the door and exercise, because that's so important for heart health.

**ATHM:** I must say, you look fantastic. More like 29.

**Dr. Shenkman:** You're too kind. Thank you. Seriously, plant-based diets definitely do support heart health and more plant predominant diets offer a lower risk of cardiovascular disease, as well as a lower risk of high blood pressure, high cholesterol diabetes, and lower risk of certain kinds of cancers and lower risk of kidney stones. It's definitely

something I support, and I encourage my patients to pursue such a diet. Being vegan can be a challenge for many people. It's a big ask of a lot of people, but certainly leaning more in the plant-based direction, consuming more fruits and vegetables and plant protein as opposed to animal proteins and consuming less red and processed meat, is going to be beneficial for heart long-term

**ATHM:** Let's look at women's health. Heart disease is a major health concern for women in the U.S. and they may not be aware of that.

**Dr. Shenkman:** Yes. I think that heart disease is the number one cause of death in both men and women. But for women I think it's important, because often women don't believe heart disease is a major concern. Women will often be more concerned about breast cancer. But that said, I think it's important to pay attention to risk factors like if you have high blood pressure and making sure that it is controlled. If you have high cholesterol making sure your cholesterol is controlled potentially being on a cholesterol lowering medication. If you have diabetes, making sure that's under the best of control, and you're seeing a doctor regularly, but also lifestyle is very important as well for prevention. Exercising regularly, maintaining a healthy diet, managing stress, staying away from smoking, minimizing alcohol consumption, and certainly avoiding illicit drugs. Those are all very important for prevention. Prevention strategies for women is crucial as well as early detection.

**ATHM:** Apparently estrogen plays a role in women's heart health.

**Dr. Shenkman:** Estrogen prior to menopause has many benefits for the heart, including improving cholesterol levels, promoting healthy blood vessels, protecting against plaque build-up in the arteries, and improves glucose metabolism and insulin sensitivity. After menopause, women's risk of heart disease rises.

Hormone replacement with estrogen after menopause has been an interesting subject. While a very large trial called the Women's Health Initiative found that hormone replacement may increase risk of heart disease if started later in menopause. However, there is a suggestion that starting hormone replacement early, within 10 years of menopause, may provide some protection against cardiovascular disease.

**ATHM:** Do you see women experiencing heart issues is it a younger age or is it still later in life?

**Dr. Shenkman:** It's interesting. I've seen women of all ages who have had heart issues. I've taken care of women as young as their early 30's who have had heart attacks, often with a family history of heart disease, or a personal history of a rheumatologic order such as lupus. I've also seen young women as young as their 20's who have had very severely

elevated cholesterol levels, likely due to a familial hypercholesterolemia which is a genetic predisposition toward high cholesterol, and we have had to be proactive in helping them to lower those levels to reduce risk of heart disease down the road.

**ATHM:** Is it true that women who have cardiovascular disease are underdiagnosed and undertreated.

**Dr. Shenkman:** Studies have shown that there definitely is some degree of bias that women with heart disease are more likely to be labeled as having anxiety or hysteria, and their complaints may not be taken as seriously as men's complaints.

**ATHM:** You alluded to heart disease being a leading cause of death in men in the U.S. Does it differ from women?

**Dr. Shenkman:** Heart disease is the leading cause of death in men and women, but women tend to present a little bit later in life than men do, particularly due to the protective effect of estrogen prior to menopause

**ATHM:** Either or both.

**Dr. Shenkman:** I don't know the statistics off the top of my head, but my understanding is that heart disease is leading cause of death in men and women. I'm not sure of the total incidence difference between men and women, but women tend to present a little bit later than men do, particularly because of estrogen and being premenopausal. There is some protection, but after menopause the numbers do become a little more equal.

As for presentations, women often will present with the very classic symptoms such as chest pressure radiating to the left arm and the neck and the jaw, shortness of breath, nausea, and vomiting. But that said, women, especially older women, often will have more atypical different presentations. They may be more likely to come in with back pain, or fatigue, or lightheadedness, as opposed to the classic symptoms that we think of.

**ATHM:** Certainly, things like smoking and obesity are major causes of heart disease and heart attacks for men or women.

**Dr. Shenkman:** Of course.

**ATHM:** What is the one most preventable cause of heart attacks?

**Dr. Shenkman:** Fortunately, fewer people are smoking, but there is still a lot of that in our society. Smoking I would say, is certainly the number one thing and most preventable cause of heart disease both in men and women.

**ATHM:** We hear a lot these days about alcohol and cannabis. There was a study that just came out about cannabis being a

cause of heart disease and heart attacks. Do you think those clinical perspectives are correct?

**Dr. Shenkman:** I think that they're definitely compelling findings. Alcohol, we know is not only a direct toxin to the heart, but consumption also raises triglycerides and high triglycerides can increase risk of heart disease. So yes, alcohol is definitely problematic when it comes to heart health. Another thing alcohol does is raise blood pressure. As for cannabis, it is not well studied, but there certainly is evidence that is suggesting there may be a link between cannabis use and heart disease.

**ATHM:** You are an advocate for integrative medicine. You're on the scientific advisory board of IMD Nutrition. What led you to that relationship?

**Dr. Shenkman:** A yoga teacher whose class I attended regularly knew that IMD Nutrition was looking for a cardiologist to support their brand and help them develop new products. She pointed them towards me, and I learned more about their mission, which I felt was quite compelling. I am a big proponent of evidence-based medicine, but lifestyle and nutrition are so important. Nutritional support from supplements are unfortunately not as well studied as conventional medications, but definitely there is an emerging role for supplements in heart health.

In cardiology, there is clearly a role for medications but I saw a greater need for a more holistic approach to accompany standard medical care. Western medicine focuses on what we can see and there is a bigger picture with cardiology. My strong desire to help others promote a healthy heart through a more integrative approach to health care is what drives my journey through medicine and brought me to partner with IMD Nutrition®.

**ATHM:** Had you previously been an advocate for supplements?

**Dr. Shenkman:** To a limited extent. But with my partnership with IMD Nutrition and my own knowledge within the supplement space it has grown significantly. I did occasionally suggest supplementation to provide benefits from heart disease, but now that I've gotten involved with IMD, I've learned more and I can advise my patients better.

**ATHM:** The two heart supplements you recommend from IMD are CholestMD® and GlucoseMD®.

**Dr. Shenkman:** That's correct. There's another product that's called CardioFitMD®. That's the newest company heart health product I've been most involved with lately. GlucoseMD® and CholestMD® are definitely things that can be beneficial for heart health. CardioFitMD® is a powdered formulation, something that you can drink. It's got probiotics and prebiotics and can help increase niacin production by the body. I drink it daily and encourage others to consume it as well.

My appreciation for, and understanding of the benefits of a healthy lifestyle, and the role of a balanced diet, led to my formulation of CardioFitMD®, the ultimate daily superfood beverage for complete heart, circulatory, metabolism, digestive, and nutritional support. With a potent daily dose of beetroot, a broad-spectrum fiber and prebiotics blend, Bacillus coagulans probiotic, and 20 key vitamins and minerals, CardioFitMD® is a great-tasting, nutrient-rich drink to help maintain a healthy, active lifestyle.

**ATHM:** I have to ask, any thoughts about the MAHA movement? Do you think they're on the right track?

**Dr. Shenkman:** I like the aspects of improving nutrition and emphasis on prevention and environmental accountability. Where I have problems with the MAHA movement is some of the skepticism towards evidence-based medicine, like the skepticism of vaccines that have been so beneficial for our society in eradicating polio and nearly eradicating things like measles.