The Health Benefits of Thankfulness

By Dr. Ramona Warren

There is no better way to start the holiday season than with a day set aside to focus on the many things to be thankful for. It is fitting that Thanksgiving is strategically placed at the beginning of, what can be, the most stressful time of the year for many people.

When our bodies experience stress, particularly ongoing, chronic stress, it causes an inflammatory response in the body, which can result in degenerative changes and serious health conditions such as a depressed immune system, heart disease, stroke and diabetes. Some studies have shown increased artery plaque in those experiencing greater stress. Other scientific studies indicate that negative emotions such as fear, anxiety, and anger can actually disrupt cardiac function.

Given the negative effects that stress can have, it’s no wonder the holidays bring an increased risk of illness and death. December is when cold and flu season peaks, as well as the risk of heart attack. Several studies show that you have a greater chance of dying on December 25th, 26th and New Year’s Day than any other day of the year, with Christmas being the day with the greatest incidence of heart attacks.

The good news is we can use thankfulness as a way to help reduce the risks of chronic stress and improve our overall health. Being grateful doesn't cost much in either time or money, and the benefits are far reaching, especially during the stressful holiday season. In fact, numerous scientific studies have shown an “Attitude of Gratitude” can have many benefits including improved self esteem, improved optimism, enhanced empathy, reduced aggression, reduced resentment, improved mental strength, and improved ability to overcome traumatic life events.

A study done in 2006 found Vietnam War Veterans that had higher levels of gratitude experienced lower rates of PTSD. Another study, published in 2012 in *Personality and Individual Differences*, reported that grateful people experienced fewer aches and pains, and reported feeling healthier than other people. Those who are more grateful also tend to take better care of their health by exercising more often and getting regular check-ups.

Gratitude can also help keep the immune system healthy. One study found students who were under stress, but maintained an optimistic and grateful attitude, maintained higher numbers of blood cells that protect the immune system compared to classmates who were more pessimistic.

Some people find gratitude easier to practice than others. Those who have more “Type B” personality traits tend to be more calm, optimistic, content and have a more positive outlook. The “Type A” personality, who tends to be more impatient, competitive, and task oriented, may find it more difficult to stop and focus on what he or she is grateful for. Regardless, being grateful is an attitude that can be developed and cultivated in each of us.

Here are a few practices you can do to give thanks every day of the year:

1. Before getting out of bed in the morning, stop and take the time to list five things you are thankful for. It can be as simple as the comfortable bed you slept in, having central heat and air conditioning, the sun shining, or the birds singing.

2. Create a list of 100 things you are grateful for in your life. You can list them in categories such as people, experiences you have had, qualities and abilities you have, etc.

3. Write out a list of people you are thankful for. Besides friends and family members, you might want to include those people you might not know personally, but who make your life so much better. For example, think about a world without garbage collectors! Or the mailman -- can you imagine how challenging life would be if we didn’t receive mail at our homes?

4. Practice gratitude before your meal. Bless your food and be grateful for healthy foods you enjoy. Think about the farmers who grew the food, as well as those who helped prepare the meal.

5. Take the time to write a letter to a friend or your significant other and really thank them for being in your life. Tell them a few things you really love about them.

6. Be grateful for the air you breathe, the life you live and the unique gifts you have. You are a miracle and you are perfect just the way you are.

7. Replace ungrateful thoughts with grateful ones. There is always a silver lining behind every dark cloud. One of my favorite verses in the Bible is Romans 12:2 which says, “…be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” We are bombarded all day long by negativity, especially given the technological age we live in. But we do have a choice. We can choose to focus on the things we can be thankful for, rather than dwelling on the negative.

8. Try writing down a few things you are grateful for before turning in for the night. A 2011 study published in *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being* found people slept better and longer when they spent about 15 minutes reflecting on things they were grateful for prior to going to sleep.

Thankfulness is the one way we can improve our health without dieting, rigorous exercise, taking a drug or a supplement. Practicing thankfulness can reward you with better health and a richer quality of life all year long.

Here’s a favorite quote to inspire you to make every day a day to give thanks: “Appreciate the little things in life for one day you may look back and realize they were the big things.”

Thank you for taking your time to read this column. I appreciate you and wish you a very happy Thanksgiving Day, and a life filled with thankfulness.