

Sorting out the Cholesterol Diet Confusion

By Dr. Christopher Napoli, Chiropractor

Based on the number of patients I see searching for nutritional advice on lowering their cholesterol, I know that it is still a point of primary interest in our society. Ask someone who has had a recent blood test and they will most certainly be able to recite their total cholesterol number. If you ask them how they can improve their results and get cholesterol under control they don't usually answer as quickly.

Thanks to a flood of information and misinformation on the subject, as well as a torrent of sales pitches for everything from fat-free cookies to "fake-fat" potato chips to magical margarine spreads, it's no wonder we're confused. Add to this all the wonderful television ads pitching prescription drugs with their high-speed disclaimers, and it's easy to understand the difficulty.

I am very glad to see that more and more people and their doctors are paying closer attention to their HDL (good cholesterol) and LDL (bad cholesterol) ratios than ever before. The total cholesterol level is far less important than the ratio of good to bad in the serum. When looking at your results keep in mind that the higher your HDL level the lower your risk of heart disease. Even if your total number is high, high HDL's can offer protection from heart disease.

Next to understanding what the cholesterol numbers mean, probably the biggest puzzle people face is what to do about it. I recently had a patient who came to see me to help her reduce her cholesterol without drugs. She had been to her doctor three months prior and was told her total cholesterol was 260 and that she should start a course of cholesterol lowering medication.

She had recently read one of my past articles about the potential dangers of these drugs and asked if she could try to lower her numbers with diet first. Her doctor said that would be fine and handed her a colorful, pre-printed diet to follow for three months. It was a high carbohydrate, low fat, very low cholesterol diet. She very diligently adhered to the program, and in three months her total cholesterol went from 260 to 296. She was devastated and completely confused.

Unfortunately, despite her best efforts, the program she was put on was doomed to fail because it is not based on sound information on how the human body makes cholesterol in the first place. Unless you are eating outrageously high amounts of saturated animal fats, studies show that the cholesterol we eat has virtually no impact on serum cholesterol. (Yep, read it again, that's what I said).

If any of you have been on the Atkins diet, or know someone who has, you you've seen this in action. The Atkins diet is an extremely low carbohydrate,

high fat, high protein diet. I never put my patients on this diet because it isn't rich enough in beneficial vegetables for my taste, however, there is no doubt it brings cholesterol down dramatically. People on this program eat bacon, eggs and sausages with cheese sauce every day, and yet their cholesterol goes down.

The reason it works is because it reduces the intake of carbohydrates, especially the starchy ones like pasta, bread, rice, potatoes, and sweets. These are the culprits in elevating cholesterol and here's why. When we eat them, our body digests and absorbs them very quickly. As a result our blood sugar rises very soon after eating them.

When blood sugar rises, insulin rises to help bring it down. Our body can only do one of two things to get rid of that blood sugar. It can burn it as fuel immediately (which it will do if you are exercising right now), or it will be turned into fat. Those are the only two choices. Since most of us don't run a marathon after every meal, the bulk of a high carbohydrate meal or snack will be turned to fat. The fat that our body makes is 98% saturated fat. It's this fat that raises the cholesterol that we're all afraid of.

This is the very same mechanism we see happening in animals. Ever wonder where the cholesterol in that fatty piece of prime rib came from? When was the last time you heard of "USDA Prime Bacon and Egg Fed Beef; Corn Fed Beef, sounds more familiar. Cattle make cholesterol pretty much the same way we do. They eat grass and grain, two foods extremely high in carbohydrates.

The bottom line is, if you want to lower your cholesterol start eating less starchy and sugary carbohydrates. I recommend a diet high in vegetables, light on starches and fruit (due to the high sugar content), moderate in protein and moderate in healthy fats. This will not only bring cholesterol down but will also promote weight loss. Consult your nutritional professional for a healthy program you can live with.

As for why patients are still being given diets like the one I spoke about, I have my own theory. At the bottom of that nice pre-printed diet was the name and logo of one of the leading cholesterol lowering medications. The idea being; try this diet for three months and when it doesn't work take this drug. Sort of like dentists giving out lollipops to help prevent tooth decay.

*Dr. Christopher Napoli, Chiropractor (718) 967-0300
Board Certified Clinical Nutritionist and Applied Kinesiologist
Board Certified American Academy of Pain Management*