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Natural Health & Wellbeing

Cholesterol

by Fiona Kane
Clinical Nutritionist

Informed Health
Phone 4722 2111
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THERE IS one number more than others which appears to be treated as most important when measuring our level of health – our cholesterol number. I often hear comments like "I am healthy because I have no or low cholesterol". **I find it is often used as an excuse to avoid changing unhealthy habits**. People making these comments are often quite overweight or have other health problems but think they are healthy because of their cholesterol number!

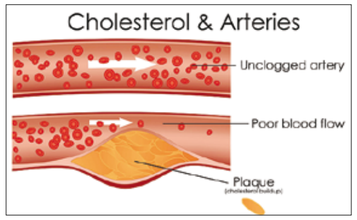
I once saw a BBC documentary where a woman who was morbidly obese said "I'm OK, my health has not been affected by my weight – my cholesterol is normal". Therefore, according to her, she didn't need to do anything! This rang alarm bells for me - how many people believe it? Your cholesterol number is not a measure of your whole health; it is just one aspect of health. What also matters is how you feel, are you energised, happy or tired, grumpy and "not quite right"? Don't let a number stop you from listening to your body!

There are two main types of cholesterol that can cause you problems, oxidised cholesterol and certain types of LDLs (particularly small dense LDLs). HDLs and LDLs can both be good or bad - depending on if they are oxidised and depending on whether important inflammatory markers are high in the blood (eg *C-reactive protein* (CRP), triglycerides, ESR and Apo lipo protein(a). Your weight, waist size, diet, blood glucose levels, insulin levels, stress levels and level of inflammation all play a big factor in whether or not you have these types of damaging cholesterol.

Cholesterol is not the enemy, did you know that it is essential in the body? It makes hormones, insulates neurons, is part of the structure of every cell in the body, produces bile to digest fats, helps metabolise important fat soluble vitamins such as vitamin D and makes hormones such as testosterone, oestrogen and adrenal hormones.

Most blood tests that are done for cholesterol measure total cholesterol, HDL and LDL. They do not measure oxidised cholesterol, they do not measure what kind of LDL cholesterol you have and they do not assess all of your cardiovascular risk factors. Many people are prescribed medication to bring down their cholesterol just based on a cholesterol number and since these medications can and do have major side effects including severe muscle wastage and pain, fatigue and memory issues, it is important to assess whether or not your cholesterol number is a problem before you are given strong medication to treat it!

A study published in the Archives of Internal Medicine in 2012 concluded that statin medication use in post menopausal women is associated with an increased risk of Diabetes, an increase in 48%! Dr Ross Walker, Cardiologist, always recommends that people have a non-invasive test called a CT Coronary Calcium Score before they are prescribed statins. This helps to identify if you have any "muck" in your arteries and therefore whether or not your cholesterol is causing you a problem.



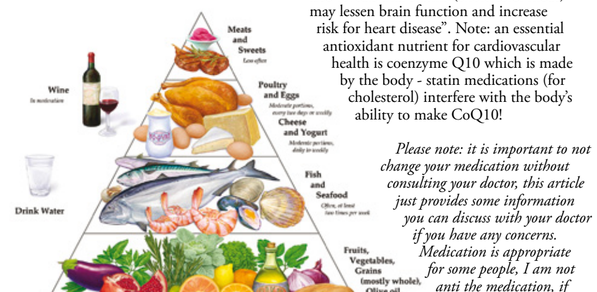
Diets high in carbohydrates (confectionary, refined foods and grains eg. sweets, crackers, bread, pasta) lead to inflammation in the body, oxidised cholesterol and an increase in the small dense LDLs (the damaging kind). The carbohydrates (whether complex or simple) ultimately break down into sugar which acts like sandpaper in the blood vessels causing damage to the artery walls and eventually some of this sugar converts into long chain saturated fats which are the kind that cause oxidative damage to the body. Hydrogenated oils, trans fats and vegetable oils also cause inflammation and oxidative stress to the body and increases blood pressure. This kind of diet (standard Australian diet or SAD diet) leads to Metabolic Syndrome (a combination of high blood pressure, blood glucose, cholesterol and abdominal weight gain) which explains why so many people are medicated for blood pressure, diabetes and cholesterol by the time they are in their 40s and 50s.

To manage your cholesterol, blood pressure and diabetes risks, it is important to eat a diet with adequate protein, fat and lots of colourful vegetables for good health. Don't avoid fat and don't avoid eggs! Just eat real foods including quality free range meats such grass fed beef, free range eggs and chicken, wild fish from the ocean salmon/mackerel etc.

Add avocado, garlic, onion, celery, extra virgin cold pressed olive oil, coconut oil, unsalted block butter (unless dairy intolerant) and colourful vegies eg. Greens, carrots, fresh beetroot, spinach, zucchini etc. Snack on small servings of raw nuts and seeds (eg almonds, Brazils, walnuts, pecans, pepitas). Antioxidant foods are essential to stop the oxidative damage/oxidised cholesterol (colourful vegetables and fruit are highest in antioxidants) eg broccoli, carrots blueberries, fresh beetroot and oranges (avoid fruit juice and canned beetroot as they are both very high in sugar).

Reduce inflammatory foods like caffeine, alcohol and packaged foods containing added salt and anything containing added sugar, especially fructose (except for an actual piece of fresh fruit). Avoid all energy drinks. Stress management is also essential as stress drives high blood pressure, inflammation and as your stress hormones are made from cholesterol, stress drives your body to make more cholesterol! Don't forget exercise is also essential and helps manage stress, blood pressure and blood sugar levels! Cardiovascular disease is a disease of inflammation so it is important to reduce inflammation in the body.

Unfortunately fat has been blamed for many health issues that we now understand are caused by poor quality fats such as vegetable oil and sugar! Our low fat, high sugar/carbohydrate diets are making us sick – chronic disease as we age is now expected rather than unusual!



In his recent book, Neurologist David Perlmutter, MD has discussed this issue in detail and blames these low fat, high carbohydrate diets on being a cause of dementia. Dr Perlmutter says that "the belief that the cholesterol we eat converts directly into blood cholesterol is unequivocally false". So don't be afraid to eat fat!

He also explains that "new research also reveals that statins (cholesterol meds) may lessen brain function and increase risk for heart disease". Note: an essential antioxidant nutrient for cardiovascular health is coenzyme Q10 which is made by the body - statin medications (for cholesterol) interfere with the body's ability to make CoQ10!

Please note: it is important to not change your medication without consulting your doctor, this article just provides some information you can discuss with your doctor if you have any concerns. Medication is appropriate for some people, I am not anti the medication, if you have heart disease it is most likely a great benefit to you but if you have no heart disease, just a high cholesterol number, maybe there are other options.

The Hawkesbury Independent does not recommend the self management of health problems. All specific medical questions should be presented to your own health care provider, as with any questions or concerns you may have regarding your individual needs and any medical conditions. Always consult a medical professional before starting a fitness program or changing your diet. Information found in the Independent is meant to support and not replace the relationship with your doctor. You should never follow suggestions in the Independent that are inconsistent with prescriptions, requirements or recommendations provided by your own doctor. You should never disregard medical advice or delay in seeking it because of something you have read here. ***If you believe you may have a medical emergency, call your doctor or 000 immediately.***

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