

On Nutrition: by Helayne Waldman, Ed.D., N.E.

How to Lower Cholesterol? Let me Count the Ways

In September, 1964, President Lyndon Johnson awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Dr. Paul Dudley White, a cardiologist who was deemed an “activating force” and “leading spokesman” for coronary health. The ironic twist to this honor was indeed noteworthy. Five decades earlier, when White introduced the German electrocardiograph to his colleagues at Harvard, they had urged him to switch tracks to a more profitable specialty. That’s how rare heart disease was in the U.S. in the early 20th Century.

Today, four decades since Dudley’s honor and thanks in large part to the denaturing (i.e., diminishing of natural properties) of whole foods and the meteoric rise of hydrogenated fats and oils, we are taking a beating from heart disease. High cholesterol levels are just one piece of the puzzle. But they’re a piece that can be readily modified, and in the majority of people, cholesterol levels can be modified without the use of dangerous drugs.

But first, let’s clear up a dangerous misconception. Cholesterol is not simply the arbitrary villain Big Media and Big Pharma so love to characterize. In fact, cholesterol plays an essential role in the human body. It’s a critical component of every cell membrane; it is essential for reproduction (we can’t make sex hormones without it), for Vitamin D and steroid hormone production, for the proper function of serotonin receptors in the brain, and a myriad of other everyday corporal tricks. The problem is that our



Standard American Diet (SAD) has allowed our cholesterol levels to soar well beyond what Mother Nature had in mind for us.

So, how to lower you cholesterol levels if they are dangerously high? Let me count the ways.

It’s always a good idea to start with food, as pure, unadulterated whole foods have cured innumerable conditions for countless centuries, and the risk of side effects is virtually nil (aside from potential allergic reactions). Cholesterol lowering food sources that yield positive results in most people include oats (particularly the bran), legumes of all types, nuts – especially almonds -- apples, carrots, and most any source of soluble fiber, for that matter. The fiber, you see, actually escorts the cholesterol right out of your body. And when it does, the excess exits peacefully, and without a fuss.

More food for thought

While you’re at it, the next time you eat an orange or grapefruit, be sure to eat the white pith too. With the latest studies suggesting results that two specialized flavanoids –

hesperetin in oranges and *naringenin* in grapefruit –have shown early promise in lowering LDL (“bad”) cholesterol, you’ll be getting a lot of bang from your citrus buck.

Now that you’re munching on that orange rind, have yourself one, two or five cups of either green, white or black tea, all of which contain flavanoids that benefit not only your cholesterol profile, but just about everything else scientists have thought of to test! And if you’re ready to fry some onions or potatoes for dinner, be sure to fry them in rice bran oil, whose cholesterol-lowering prowess has recently been publicized in the American Journal of Nutrition. (rice bran itself seems to exert the same effect).

Herbs and spices are also superstars of the cholesterol-lowering cast. Garlic, ginger and curcumin lead the pack, with the more exotic guggul and arjuna extracts close behind. Artichoke leaf extract also garners rave reviews and plant sterols - fats bound to the fibers of certain plants - have even gotten the nod from the ultra conservative FDA who authorized a “heart healthy” statement on foods containing these compounds in 2000. You’ll find these sterols in a concentrated form called *beta-sitosterol* at your local health food store.

But for truly sensational cholesterol-lowering pleasure, hear this! One ingenious supplement company, Designs for Health, has even taken plant sterols and put them in a mouth-watering product they call “Cardio Truffles.”

Mmmm...how much better does it get?

Nutritional support

When food and herbs don't quite do the trick, many health care practitioners are now recommending therapeutic levels of vitamins and other supplements to help lower dangerously high cholesterol levels. *Pantethine*, also known as Vitamin B5 or pantothenic acid not only lowers cholesterol, but also seems to also improve a condition known as fatty liver. *Tocotrienols*, a recently researched, highly touted form of Vitamin E, has shown promising results not only in cholesterol reduction, but in reducing a phenomenon known as platelet clumping, an independent risk factor for heart disease.

Another relative newcomer, *policosanol*, is a waxy substance derived from sugar cane that seems to slow cholesterol synthesis in the liver as well as increase liver re-absorption of LDL cholesterol.

Last but not least is Vitamin B3, or niacin, which many practitioners and patients swear by. It's not without its costs, however. Niacin can cause unpleasant side effects like skin tingling, itching or flushing and, its use requires regular monitoring as it can affect liver enzyme levels.

This is by no means an exhaustive list, and biochemical variation means that what works beautifully for one person may fall flat as a pancake for the next. Still, there are just so many alternatives to statin drugs; it's worth

experimenting to see what may work for you.

Be sure to discuss the options with a trusted health care practitioner before embarking on a cholesterol-lowering regimen. And remember, statin drugs, with their myriad of side effects and their nutrient-depleting profile should be a last resort for stubbornly high cholesterol, never a first pick.

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