

The Truth About Cholesterol

By

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There is perhaps no substance in the human body which has caused our society more recent concern than cholesterol. We are bombarded almost daily with advertising that urges us to “talk to your doctor” about how to lower the “bad” cholesterol that allegedly clogs our cardiovascular systems. While conferring with your health care practitioner is certainly advisable when dealing with this issue, it is imperative that we do so armed with accurate information. Some of this information is not well known and, therefore, quite surprising.

At the outset, it should be understood that cholesterol is a *necessary* substance in our bodies. First and foremost, cholesterol constitutes the mechanism which transports fats and proteins (therefore, the name “lipoprotein”) to and from our cellular structure. The reason that we have both low and high density types (i.e., LDL and HDL) is that they each perform different functions. LDL is a more loosely bound substance meant to bring fats and proteins TO the cells for use there, while HDL has a tighter chemical bond meant to RETURN them to the liver for processing. So it is important to have adequate amounts of both types for our bodies to operate properly.

Additionally, cholesterol is the primary raw material comprising all of the steroid based hormones in the body. Cortisol, DHEA, testosterone, progesterone and the estrogen compounds all derive from cholesterol. Therefore, too low a cholesterol value runs the risk of depriving our bodies of the material we need to synthesize these important hormones. The relationship of these hormones is quite complicated and interdependent, but all depend on adequate cholesterol to properly perform their functions.

Unfortunately, there are several myths that have grown up around the subject of cholesterol over the years, most of them having to do with the money to be made by promoting anti-cholesterol drugs. The first is that the cholesterol content of food has a direct impact on our serum cholesterol levels. There are many studies which debunk this “urban health legend,” but the most compelling is the Framingham Heart Study. This decades-long, ongoing study by Boston University Medical School discovered NO connection between the cholesterol content of food and serum cholesterol levels. In fact, many people who eat healthful quantities of what conventional wisdom would call “bad” foods (i.e., foods high in Omega 3 and 6 fatty acids) have lower cholesterol than those who do not.

The second myth is that high cholesterol alone is responsible for cardiovascular disease. Thanks to pioneering research conducted at facilities such as the Cooper Aerobics Institute in Dallas, we now know that cholesterol in and of itself is *not* the primary culprit in the onset of cardiovascular disease; inflammation of the blood vessels is. This inflammation, in turn, is caused by a number of factors, including stress, over exercise and consumption of processed foods which all set up an inflammatory process in the body. This has caused a paradigm shift within the scientific community toward an

“inflammatory model” and away from the old “congestive model” to explain the processes of cardiovascular disease.

The third myth is that high cholesterol can be addressed in isolation without adverse consequences to the rest of the body. Nothing could be further from the truth. High cholesterol is a signal that something within the body is out of balance. For example, if a person is under protracted stress, the body will produce more cholesterol to provide the raw material for synthesis of greater quantities of stress-related hormones. If a person’s body is having difficulty providing itself with adequate protein (usually because of poor protein digestion), cholesterol may elevate to provide more *lipoprotein* to the cells to compensate. You can see from these two examples alone that high cholesterol may be an indication of an underlying concern that needs to be addressed, rather than a problem in and of itself.

The myth of “the lower your LDL value is, the healthier you are,” is perhaps the most prevalent in the public mind and potentially the most dangerous. Thankfully, the majority of the health care community has conclusively debunked this idea. However, the undue influence of drug companies attempting to peddle their wares continually intrudes into the establishment of truly safe cholesterol levels. In other words, the jury is still out.

Understanding the functions and uses of cholesterol in the body can go a long way toward demystifying this important subject. We work with our clients to provide them with a balanced, comprehensive approach toward this and many other diet and lifestyle issues. We can help you attain balance, too!

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