

Cholesterol truths

Managing this risk factor

Kate Rhéaume, ND

Managing cholesterol is a cornerstone of modern medical care. Patients will say, "I have high cholesterol" as if it is a disease, but it is not. High cholesterol is only one risk factor (and not a particularly predictive one) for eventually developing cardiovascular disease.

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Somewhere along the way, correlation has been confused with causation. Elevated cholesterol levels are an important red flag, but high cholesterol is simply a sign of an underlying problem and not the problem itself.

CHRONIC INFLAMMATION

Cholesterol serves many important roles in the body. In the context of heart health it is an anti-inflammatory, rising in response to inflammation in the cardiovascular system. If, over time, the inflammation persists and cholesterol can't compensate, heart disease sets in and cholesterol gets the blame.

What causes this chronic inflammation? For most people it is insulin resistance, brought about by the consumption of too much sugar and high-fructose corn syrup, and too many processed foods that are bereft of nutrients and fibre.

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PHARMACEUTICAL OVERKILL

Taking statins, a range of cholesterol-lowering pharmaceuticals, to reduce cholesterol by merely blocking its production and not addressing its cause is shortsighted. The most compelling evidence suggests that it is oxidized LDL cholesterol, and not just high levels of cholesterol or LDL cholesterol, that causes the development of arterial inflammation.

The right dietary changes (such as lowering sugar and increasing fibre) and natural health products aim to lower insulin resistance, quell inflammation, and protect against oxidative degeneration of blood lipids.

NATURAL ASSISTANCE

Of all the nutritional products that can help prevent cardiovascular disease (CVD), arguably the most important is fish oil. Long-chain omega-3 fatty acids from fish may be even more effective than statins at reducing cardiac mortality.

In addition, coenzyme Q₁₀, a fat-soluble antioxidant, prevents arterial inflammation by reducing the accumulation

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of oxidized fats in blood vessels. The antioxidant activity of vitamin E is dependant on CoQ₁₀, and the latter plays a fundamental role in energy production of heart-muscle cells.

Since the body's own production of CoQ₁₀ declines in the fourth decade and its synthesis is greatly reduced by conventional lipid-lowering drugs, supplementation is critical.

Finally, consuming antioxidants from a wide variety of sources by eating a rainbow of fruit and vegetables will ensure the greatest possible protection against the free-radical damage of lipids. **a**

Kate Rhéaume, ND, is a writer and educator. A graduate and former faculty member of the Canadian College of Naturopathic Medicine, she lectures on health and wellness across Canada.

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