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[ASK EATINGWELL]

CHOLESTEROL CONUNDRUM

How much does the cholesterol I get through food really affect my blood cholesterol level?

—M. Pekala, Minneapolis, MN

It depends. Most people absorb about half the cholesterol they consume through foods, but absorption rates vary (from 20 to 60 percent) from person to person. This variation may help explain why *dietary* cholesterol seems to increase levels of “unhealthy” LDL blood cholesterol in some people more than others, says EATINGWELL Advisor Alice Lichtenstein.

In any case, saturated and trans fats have a bigger detrimental effect on blood cholesterol levels, and heart health in general, than dietary cholesterol. “Trans and saturated fats not only affect how much plaque is deposited in blood vessels but also may damage the tissue of blood vessels,” says Susan Moores, M.S., R.D., a spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association. With a few exceptions—notably eggs and shellfish—foods high in cholesterol, such as fatty meats and whole-milk dairy, also tend to be high in saturated fat. Cutting back on sources of saturated fat automatically limits intake of dietary cholesterol.

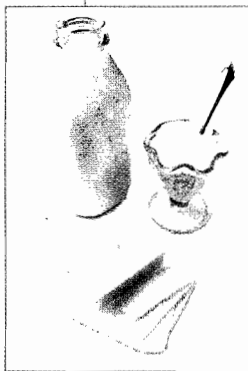
Really, the best approach to controlling blood cholesterol is a big-picture one. “Most important to heart health is achieving a healthy body weight through diet and exercise,” explains Lichtenstein. Independent of specific dietary choices, research shows that shedding excess pounds lowers “unhealthy” LDL cholesterol and boosts the “healthy” HDL kind.

BOTTOM LINE: Unless your doctor has advised you to, don’t sweat counting dietary cholesterol; it’s just one factor (and not the most important one) affecting blood lipids. Limit intake of saturated fats by loading up on vegetables, fruits and whole grains, choosing low-fat dairy and lean proteins, and substituting healthy oils for butter. Buy only crackers, snacks and margarine-type spreads that are labeled trans fat free (and don’t include “partially hydrogenated fat” in the ingredients list). Maintain a healthy weight. And, if you’d like, enjoy an egg each morning and shellfish several times a week. —D. Milton Stokes, M.P.H., R.D.

[FEATURED NUTRIENT]

CONJUGATED LINOLEIC ACID

The trans fats created when oils are hydrogenated are at least as harmful as saturated fats. But you may be surprised to learn that a naturally occurring trans fat, called conjugated linoleic acid (CLA), may not pose the health risks associated with manmade trans fats—and may in fact offer health benefits. Produced when “good” bacteria found in the guts of ruminants (e.g., cows and sheep) rearrange the chemical bonds of polyunsaturated fats from plants, CLA is found in full-fat dairy products, beef and lamb, especially from grass-fed animals. Much CLA research focuses on its potential role in weight loss and bone health, though preliminary animal studies suggest it may also lower heart disease and cancer risk.



BONE BOOSTER. A 2005 study reported that postmenopausal women with higher dietary CLA intakes had denser bones than women with lower intakes. How? Animal research hints that CLA may help preserve bone by inhibiting the activity of compounds that cause inflammation and bone breakdown.

MIRACLE FAT BURNER? CLA is sold as a weight-loss supplement and, indeed, research in mice has shown that CLA-rich diets promote the loss of fat, while preserving muscle mass (likely by increasing the rate at which the body burns calories and fat). But human studies haven’t been as promising. For example, a recent study found that taking 3.4 grams of CLA in a daily capsule—15 to 20 times what the average person gets in food—did not help people to maintain a recent weight loss. The problem may have

been inadequate doses; however, “current evidence suggests that high doses of CLA used in animal studies may have adverse reactions in humans, such as increased risk of type 2 diabetes,” says Thomas Larsen, Ph.D., author of the study and researcher at the Royal Veterinary & Agricultural University in Denmark.

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW. Research supporting CLA’s benefits is preliminary at best; supplements may not be safe for everyone. Until there’s more conclusive science, think of CLA as just one potentially healthful food component, and avoid supplements. —Sylvia M. Geiger, M.S., R.D.

[WHAT IS THIS?]

SEEN ON: CEREALS, BREADS, BANANAS, CANNED TUNA AND OTHER FOODS
(see americanheart.org)

Foods with a “heart check” mark must contain *less than or equal to* 3g fat (≤1g saturated), 20 mg cholesterol and 480 mg sodium. They also must provide 10% or more of the daily value for protein, vitamin A, vitamin C, calcium, iron *or* dietary fiber. Manufacturers pay an average of about \$3,500/year to use the mark and fund the program.

NEED-TO-KNOW: As EATINGWELL Advisor Marion Nestle points out in *What to Eat* (North Point Press, 2006), the AHA doesn’t define heart-check limits for calories or added sugars (which can lead to weight gain—bad news for the heart). Thus, you’ll find it on Cocoa Puffs and Chocolate Lucky Charms—breakfast picks that certainly aren’t as healthy as many other, higher-fiber cereals whose makers haven’t paid to use the mark. Use the check mark to help you find heart-healthy foods fast—but know that it’s a marketing tool for food makers too. —Jenna B. Damareck



American Heart Association

Meets American Heart Association food criteria for saturated fat and cholesterol for healthy people over age 2.

While many factors affect heart disease, diets low in saturated fat and cholesterol may reduce the risk of this disease.