

Optimizing Cholesterol

By JJ Virgin, CNS, CHFS, Huffpost Healthy Living

Dear JJ: I thought a fatty diet raised cholesterol, but now I'm reading fat is healthy and I don't need to worry so much about cholesterol. I'm so confused!

For far too long, dietary fat — especially saturated fat — got blamed for raising cholesterol. Turns out the cholesterol and dietary fat story become way, way more complex than we thought even a decade ago.

“[T]here’s much more to the cholesterol story than the old-fashioned division between ‘good’ (HDL) and ‘bad’ (LDL) cholesterol,” write Drs. Jonny Bowden and Steven Masley in their book *Smart Fat*. “More important than just your overall cholesterol numbers are the *size* and *number* of the cholesterol particles themselves, regardless of whether those particles are found in HDL or LDL cholesterol. In general, big fluffy molecules of cholesterol don’t do any damage, while small dense ones do.”

To get an accurate picture of your cholesterol profile, Dr. Mark Hyman recommends a NMR lipid profile, which measures LDL, HDL, triglycerides, and the particle number and particle size of each type of cholesterol and triglycerides.

“This is a newer test,” he writes in *Eat Fat, Get Thin*, “but I would demand it from your doctor, because the typical cholesterol tests done by most labs and doctors are out of date.” Let’s say your levels come back abnormal. How can you optimize cholesterol levels? Well, for decades most doctors recommended a low-fat diet, yet today we’re seeing a massive paradigm shift where sugar — not saturated fat or overall dietary fat — becomes the target for high cholesterol and numerous other problems.

In fact, some studies suggest low-fat diets might actually contribute to rather than lower heart disease risk. One eight-year study found reduced total fat intake among postmenopausal women “did not significantly reduce the risk of [coronary heart disease], stroke, or [cardiovascular disease] and achieved only modest effects on [cardiovascular] risk factors.”

That makes sense when you consider low-fat diets actually lower your large HDL particles. Studies show high levels of large HDL particles can help reduce your risk for heart disease. A low-fat diet also means you’re probably neglecting essential fatty acids, which among their functions boost brain health. One review of three studies found omega-3 fatty acids more effective than a placebo for depression in both adults and children as well as bipolar depression.

Unfortunately, low-fat diets often become high-sugar impact diets, which knock your cholesterol and overall health out of whack. Studies show fructose especially raises triglycerides and becomes a risk factor for cardiovascular disease and metabolic syndrome.

“Added sugar, especially fructose, which is a component of table sugar, high fructose corn syrup, and most caloric sweeteners, tends to increase total cholesterol and LDL (bad

cholesterol), lower HDL (the good cholesterol) and raise triglycerides,” writes Dr. Ayala Laufer-Cahana about a recent study that questioned whether saturated fat or added sugar adversely impacted cholesterol levels more.

Hyman agrees. He says high-carb diets raise triglycerides, lower HDL, and increase LDL: The exact opposite of what you want for great health.

“A diet high in refined carbs and bad fats will raise the number of small, dense, atherogenic (those that form artery plaque) cholesterol particles and lower the number of big fluffy harmless ones,” write Bowden and Masley. “A diet lower in sugar and processed carbs has the exact opposite effect.”

While the solution might sound counterintuitive, experts argue to optimize cholesterol you want to eat more fat, but the right kinds.

“The *type* of fat that you eat is more important than the amount of fat,” writes Hyman. “Trans fats or hydrogenated fats and refined vegetable oils (omega-6 PUFAs) promote abnormal cholesterol, whereas omega-3 fats from fish and monounsaturated fats found in nuts and olive oil actually improve the type and amount of cholesterol your body produces.”

These 10 strategies can help you further reduce sugar and dial up healthy fats.

1. **Zero in on fructose.** “Fructose is a problem because when ingested in high amounts,” writes Hyman, “it turns on the cholesterol production factory in your liver, called lipogenesis.” Indeed, one meta-analysis found high fructose intake increases serum LDL-cholesterol and total cholesterol.

2. **Eat the right saturated fats.** Skip the fast-food burger and get your saturated fat from healthy sources like coconut and grass-fed beef. “When you eat sugar and refined carbs, you get more of the small, bad LDL particles,” writes Hyman. “When you eat saturated fat, you get more of the light, fluffy LDL particles, which are not associated with heart disease risk.”

3. **Reduce inflammation.** Inflammation contributes to nearly disease, including cardiovascular problems. “The main culprits of this inflammation are highly processed carbs such as sugar and flour, as well as pro-inflammatory omega-6 vegetable oils such as corn, sunflower and soybean oil,” writes Dain Wallis. Studies show reducing inflammation help improve cholesterol levels.

4. **Go low-glycemic.** One study found high-glycemic sugars and starches increase triglycerides as well as small, dense LDL and HDL, whereas low-carbohydrate diets create the opposite effect. When you eat a low-sugar impact, whole foods diet, you automatically decrease your glycemic load while stepping up healthy fats, fiber, and protein.

5. **Up your omegas.** Studies show even low amounts of essential fatty acids, especially omega-3s, can elevate large HDL particles, improve cholesterol levels, and protect your heart. Wild-caught fish becomes ideal, but freshly ground flaxseed and walnuts also count towards your

omega 3 intake.

6. **Aim for 50.** Epidemiologic and experimental data show increasing dietary fiber can help lower low-density lipoprotein cholesterol (LDL-C) and decrease your coronary heart disease risk. That's why I want you to work up to 50 grams daily from high-fiber foods and, if necessary, a professional supplement. "Eat fiber to shed pounds, lower your blood sugar levels and blood pressure, and improve your cholesterol profile," write Bowden and Masley.

7. **Drink responsibly.** "Resveratrol — an anti-aging nutrient found primarily in red wine and the skins of dark grapes — protects your arteries against blood clots, improves their elasticity, and reduces blood pressure and oxidized LDL cholesterol," write Bowden and Masley. Among its benefits, studies show resveratrol reduces platelet aggregation, induces vasorelaxation, limits endothelial activation, and modulates lipid and lipoprotein metabolism. Easy does it: Red wine is not an unlimited drink to optimize health.

8. **Burst to optimize.** Consistent exercise can optimize cholesterol, but who has hours to spend in the gym? Fortunately, high-intensity interval training (HIIT) or burst training can give you a full-body workout in just minutes. One study among young men found HIIT improved their blood lipid profile. I combine HIIT with weight resistance in my Fast Blasts, which you can knock out in eight - yes, eight - minutes a day. Grab a FREE one here.

9. **Get great sleep.** Studies show crappy sleep adversely affects your cholesterol profile and ramps up inflammation, increasing your cardiovascular disease risk. To optimize cholesterol, fat loss, and lots more, aim for seven to nine hours of quality, uninterrupted shut-eye nightly.

10. **Dial down stress.** Among its damage, studies show stress increases your cardiovascular disease risk. Whether that involves yoga, meditation, deep breathing, or meeting a bestie at Starbucks, figure out what works for you to de-stress and prioritize it.

What strategy would you add here to optimize cholesterol levels, reduce your disease risk, and stay lean? Share yours below, and keep those fab questions coming at AskJJ@jjvirgin.com.

Additional References

Bowden, Jonny and Masley, Steven. Smart Fat: Eat More Fat. Lose More Weight. Get Healthy Now. New York: HarperOne, 2016.

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