

Cholesterol is Not the Enemy

By Dr. Ramona Warren

Since the 1960s, we have been taught that cholesterol is “Public Enemy No. 1” and is the main cause of heart disease. Research, however, is showing that cholesterol is NOT the villain. According to many recent studies, the belief that elevated cholesterol causes arterial plaque and leads to heart disease is a myth. Research reveals that a high total cholesterol level is just one factor (and not even the most important factor) in regard to your RISK of developing heart disease. If our blood test comes back with an elevated total cholesterol, there are a number of factors that should be considered as to the source of the elevation. The elevated number serves as a warning to let you know there is something out of balance in your body but, before we reach for a statin, we need to dig a little deeper to find the root cause.

Cholesterol is a natural substance in the body with up to 75 percent being produced by the liver. Cholesterol is vital to our health since every cell membrane in the body contains cholesterol. Cholesterol is also important in our hormonal health since the hormones, estrogen, progesterone and testosterone as well as the adrenal hormones are synthesized from cholesterol. There are thousands of functions in the body that are dependent on cholesterol. When you limit foods high in cholesterol, your body will increase its production of cholesterol because it **needs** cholesterol. In fact, in a single day, your body can produce more cholesterol than you can eat in your diet.

When your total cholesterol is over 200, many times a statin will be recommended. Statin drugs are the No. 1 selling drugs in the world. Global sales in 2009 were reported to be \$11.4 billion, but these drugs carry many adverse side effects. One expert, Barbara H. Roberts, M.D., director of the Women's Cardiac Center at the Miriam Hospital in Providence, R.I. has been involved in many studies and has written *The Truth About Statins: Risks and Alternatives to Cholesterol-Lowering Drugs* and another book, *How to Keep From Breaking Your Heart: What Every Woman Needs to Know About Cardiovascular Disease*. Dr. Roberts states in an interview with the Huffington Post, “Every week in my practice I see patients with serious side effects to statins, and many did not need to be treated with statins in the first place. These side effects range from debilitating muscle and joint pain to transient global amnesia, neuropathy, cognitive dysfunction, fatigue and muscle weakness. Most of these symptoms subside or improve when they are taken off statins. There is even growing evidence of a statin link to Lou Gehrig’s disease.”

The good news is that cholesterol can easily be lowered without the use of statin drugs. When you look for and correct the underlying cause of elevated cholesterol, you will naturally lower your cholesterol and improve your overall health. Three of the most common causes of elevated cholesterol are poor thyroid function, inflammation in the body and a diet high in refined carbohydrates.

Common symptoms of a low-functioning thyroid include:

- Fatigue
- Weight gain
- Hair loss

- Joint pain
- Dry and itchy skin
- Brain fog
- Elevated total cholesterol
- Elevated LDL

Standard blood work includes only the TSH levels to measure thyroid function. Often this number will be in the normal range, and the patient is told that their thyroid is normal despite the fact they suffer with many classic thyroid symptoms. A simple test you can do at home to help determine thyroid function is the Barnes Test where you measure your resting body temperature. To perform this test you will take a thermometer and place it in your armpit first thing in the morning before you get out of bed. Leave it there for 5 minutes then record your temperature. Do this for 5 days. Your temperature should be at least 97.8 degrees. If it is consistently lower, this is an indication of a low-functioning thyroid gland and it would be helpful to have a more extensive blood test that includes a complete thyroid panel. Sometimes the blood work looks fine but the patient still suffers with low thyroid symptoms. A doctor who does functional medicine will often run other tests including a Tissue Mineral Analysis, which looks at thyroid function at the cellular level rather than just in the blood to see if the thyroid hormone is getting through the cell membrane. When proper thyroid levels are restored, it can reduce high cholesterol levels and improve many symptoms and health problems.

Inflammation in the body can raise cholesterol levels and is often due to an increased intake of refined carbohydrates. These foods are high glycemic foods, which cause blood sugar to spike thereby increasing insulin levels in the blood. High insulin levels lead to inflammation. The underlying cause of most diseases, including heart disease, is a diet high in sugar and refined carbohydrates. In fact, sugar causes many more problems in the body than cholesterol. To naturally reduce your cholesterol levels, simply reduce high glycemic foods such as cereals, breads, fried foods, fast foods and packaged or processed foods.

Additionally, seek to consume a variety of colorful vegetables and lean meats, including blueberries, apples, tomatoes, nuts, seeds and turmeric. Taking a quality fish oil and niacin can also help to bring cholesterol levels in a healthy range. Physical exercise in the form of walking is also beneficial. Shoot for 30 minutes of walking at least 5 days a week.

Cholesterol is not the enemy. It is a natural substance our body needs. It is our diet and lifestyle that is at the root of the problem. Next week, we will explore cholesterol in more detail and look at how “ratios rule.”

If you would like more information on a cholesterol-lowering diet and specific supplements to help with improving cholesterol levels, please email me at pathwaysth@gmail.com.