



The Hidden Enemy: Sneaky Sources of Cholesterol

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Is high cholesterol sneaking up on you?

With two kinds of cholesterol and seemingly dozens of factors affecting them both, keeping up with both low-density lipoprotein (LDL, or bad) cholesterol and high-density lipoprotein (HDL, or good) cholesterol levels can be confusing.

But monitoring both is vital. Experts now believe that a high level of good cholesterol (HDL) can be nearly as important a factor in avoiding heart disease as a low level of bad cholesterol (LDL).

And while most people are familiar with dietary tricks like drinking a daily glass of wine to raise HDL or avoiding foods like french fries to lower LDL, the truth is that cholesterol can still sneak in — often, when you least expect it.

"You'll think you're not having [high] cholesterol foods," says Molly Siple, a registered dietitian, nutritionist and author. "But if you're having a big bran muffin made with oil that has saturated fats, you're not doing yourself a favor."

What Affects Blood Sugar?

"Colas are the worst thing to happen because there is so much sugar in a cola, and everyone is drinking them," says Gordon Ewy, M.D., of the University of Arizona Heart Center. "Over a year, the extra sugar that you get from drinking two or three colas every day is enough to put on 15 pounds."

It's also enough to lower your HDL cholesterol level.

Controlling your blood sugar level is difficult, according to Siple, because we simply don't realize how much of our daily diet is filled with foods containing high glycemic levels — which measure how much a food's carbohydrates elevate your blood sugar. These high levels keep the body from processing carbohydrates correctly, which in turn lead to the overproduction of insulin.

"The body deals with that excess sugar and turns it into fat," Siple says. "And it can also raise cholesterol levels."

That means foods with high-fructose corn syrup can lead to lower HDL — as can white sugar, white flour (most baked goods), white rice and potatoes.

But the biggest, sneakiest culprit? Bagels.

"You could probably start off your day with a hot fudge sundae," Siple says. "And you would be better off than eating a bagel, at least in terms of glycemic levels."

What to Look Out for at the Grocery Store

Of course, there is more to monitoring your cholesterol than just watching how much sugar and carbohydrates you consume. Putting the right foods in your grocery cart makes all the difference.

"The public often is confused," says Janet Brill, a registered dietician and nutritionist. "So, the first thing you want to remember is that if you want to lower your cholesterol, foods from animals have it, and foods from plants do not."

How much cholesterol is safe in a given day? The National Cholesterol Education Program (NCEP) says that a person with a normal cholesterol level should limit himself to 300 milligrams of dietary cholesterol a day. Someone who needs to lower his levels should limit to 200 milligrams daily — which isn't a lot, considering how Americans eat.

"To put it in perspective, one egg yolk has about 215 milligrams of dietary cholesterol," Brill explains. "You also want to avoid organ meats. Most animal products will have dietary cholesterol, but organ meats are a real concentrated source."

Reading the labels

Maintaining an ideal, cholesterol-light diet also requires keeping an eye on saturated fats and trans fatty acids, Brill says. The average person should stay under 15 grams of saturated fat and avoid all trans fatty acids.

"Dietary cholesterol is always listed on the package in milligrams," Brill says. "And both saturated fats and trans fats are listed in grams."

Finally, if you're serious about keeping your cholesterol in check — and maintaining high HDL cholesterol levels — there is one more sneaky, nonfood item to avoid: cigarettes.

According to a Vanderbilt University study, smoking cigarettes can cause an unhealthy decrease in HDL. Within a week of quitting, however, the average person's HDL levels increased by seven points.

Healthier lungs and cholesterol levels — two more good reasons to stop smoking.

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