

The Other Side Of The Cholesterol Story

BY KAY ZEOSKY
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TURIN, NY — The next time you go to a party, or a family get-together of some sort, check your watch when you walk in and count how many minutes pass before someone starts talking about their cholesterol. If I were a bookmaker, I'd lay odds that you wouldn't wait any more than ten minutes. It's astounding -- perfectly normal people who used to ask you about your kids, sports, or the weather, find it extremely difficult to discuss anything except their cholesterol levels. All of us know a few people who have had by-passes. One surgeon brought us a piece of the filled artery that was removed from my mother-in-law. It felt like soft rubber with some chips in it that reminded me of what I sometimes scrape out of the bottom of my teakettle.

I was all geared up to find out the latest on cholesterol, so I called our nearest "Healthy Heart" program for additional information. Carol Lewis, the director, told me that just changing from butter to oleo is not the benefit that a lot of people perceive it to be. When oleo is changed to the same consistency as butter, it is much more highly saturated. Tub, or softer, oleo would be lower in cholesterol. She also urges people not to avoid dairy products. With the huge problem of osteoporosis in our society, it is extremely hard to fill our needs for calcium without dairy products.

Then I headed for the nearest college library to do some research. Those people who do have a problem with their cholesterol have got their work cut out for them trying to decide what is actually in that package of food they just picked up off the shelf.

I found that our labeling laws need a LOT of work! Under the existing regulations, a claim about cholesterol does not require the labeling of fatty acids. Thus a product that has "CHOLESTEROL FREE" spread across the label can be high in saturated fats. This is pretty confusing. I also found that a product can say "100% VEGETABLE OIL" and still contain

highly saturated tropical oils such as palm, palm-kernel, or coconut oil, as well as other oils saturated by hydrogenation. The information about nutrition per serving can be adjusted by the manufacturer, since he can decide what constitutes a serving, as well as how many servings are contained in the box.

While muddling around there, I came across the September issue of *The Atlantic Monthly* with the words, "THE CHOLESTEROL MYTH -- Lowering Your Cholesterol is Next to Impossible With Diet, And Often Dangerous With Drugs -- And it Won't Make You Live Any Longer" splashed across the front. The feature story, which used most of the issue, was taken from a book entitled *Heart Failure* written by Thomas J. Moore and soon to be published by Random House Inc. If you can find it in your library, it is VERY interesting.

Many years ago the Framingham researchers selected 912 men and women and tried to match the cholesterol levels in their diets with the cholesterol levels in their blood. They were surprised to

realize that they could find no such relationship. In fact, 40 years after the study began, the mortality rate was re-examined. The deaths from other causes of the low cholesterol level group mostly offset any incidence of heart attacks. The researchers, in fact, said that people whose cholesterol levels are declining may be at special risk. "After 50 years the association of mortality with cholesterol values is confounded by people whose cholesterol levels are falling -- perhaps due to diseases predisposing to death." That statement never got a lot of publicity.

William C. Taylor led a team of researchers and physicians at Harvard. They have put together results of the Framingham study and a Multiple Risk Factor Intervention Trial (MR. FIT) done by the Task Force on Arteriosclerosis, and announced that for people without other risk factors such as smoking or high blood pressure, "we calculate a gain in life expectancy of three days to three months from a lifelong program of cholesterol reduction." How do you decide when you are 30 what that extra month of life is worth at

age 75? They also felt they might be overstating the benefits of cholesterol reduction because they do not know whether limiting cholesterol intake would increase other risks. These results were published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* in 1987.

Moore states that daily treatment of 2,000 men with severely elevated cholesterol for seven and a half years may have lowered the chances of a non-fatal heart attack from eight to seven percent, but it did not improve life expectancy at all.

At one time, cholesterol was suspected of high rates of colon cancer. It turned out that the cancer patients had, instead, very low levels. In 1971, Morton Lee Pearce and Seymour Dayton reported in *The Lancet* an excess of cancer deaths in a diet trial using diets high in polyunsaturated fats. Similar findings happened in 1978 in experiments done by the World Health Organization. By 1980, French researchers studied 7,603 male government employees. As the cholesterol levels fell below 200 the incidence of cancer climbed stead-

ily. They felt that it "in all probability reflects the advance of the clinical course of cancer." In 1987 the National Health Nutrition and Examination Survey of 12,488 men and women, the men with the lowest cholesterol levels were more than twice as likely to be diagnosed with cancer than those with the highest cholesterol levels. Michael F. Oliver, a British heart researcher asks, "How much cholesterol can be depleted from cell membranes over so many years without alteration of their function?" Could those cells then admit carcinogens?

A cholesterol lowering drug was given to 1,906 men at extremely high risk of heart attack for 7.4 years. There were fewer heart attacks, but there was no effect on life expectancy. Moore says a total of \$23 million in drugs may have prevented 36 heart attacks. That's \$647,205 per heart attack forestalled.

Many tests are highly inaccurate. Walt Bogdanich, a *Wall Street Journal* reporter sent blood samples to five different laboratories. The results placed

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Retired Couple

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The former owners of the farm still live in the brick farm house. Louise thinks she will be content to continue to live in town and commute to the country. Paul, on the other hand, says, "I believe I might like to live out here once everything is completed."

Louise smiles, a Cheshire cat grin, looks at Paul and nods her head. "You're winning me over, aren't you?" she laughs.

Buying the farm also meant buying machinery. The Longs found a tractor in West Virginia and then went shopping for a hay baler. "It cost us \$50,000 just to make hay," confesses Paul.

When the fencing is completed, the Longs will be ready to go cattle searching. "I've been reading some ads," Paul says. "By the time the fencing is finished, we'll be ready."

Meantime, the couple is thoroughly enjoying the brisk sunny days of autumn. "As long as the weather stays nice, I'm not a bit sorry we got back into this," Louise comments.



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