

Healthy Living

Fact Sheet



Stress and Cholesterol

Dr John G. Clark, MD

What is Hypercholesterolemia?

Hypercholesterolemia is the medical term for when a person's blood cholesterol is found to be too high. This is a concern because elevated blood cholesterol has been found to increase the likelihood of heart attack and stroke.

How can psychological stress raise a person's cholesterol too high?

It may not seem intuitive, but it is true: stress raises the blood cholesterol. The sequence is as follows. Stress causes a release of the hormone cortisol. Cortisol in turn causes an elevation in blood sugar (glucose). When the blood sugar rises, the pancreas releases insulin, but insulin does not just help lower blood glucose levels, it also raises the blood cholesterol! The more stressed you become, the higher your cholesterol can go!

Encouragement

*"Though a thousand
may fall beside you,
and a multitude on
your right side, it will
not reach you."*

Psalm 91:7 (NET)



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Natural lifestyle approach

Dietary Considerations

Foods that raise cholesterol include animal products, saturated fats, cooking oils, margarines, butter, refined sugar, and lard. A low fat, total vegetarian diet has no cholesterol and is also helpful in relieving psychological symptoms of stress, anxiety, and even panic.

A diet designed to improve cholesterol levels and mental performance will be a nutrient-rich, complex carbohydrate diet consisting of: fresh fruit and vegetables, nuts and seeds (in moderation), and grains and beans (free from grease and cooking oils).

Fibre is always beneficial in lowering cholesterol. Fibre that will lower your cholesterol usually comes from grains, beans, root vegetables (like carrots), and fruits.

Exercise

Exercise helps lower stress and blood lipids while it increases the good cholesterol referred to as "HDL".

Water

Good hydration lowers blood cholesterol by sheer dilution and improves brain performance. Three litres of water a day is recommended.



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Jenifer Skues
Health Psychologist

Mind–Body Connection

The 3 stages of stress

The General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS) was first outlined by Hans Selye in the early 1950s and explains how we react to stress physiologically and behaviorally, by breaking it into three specific stages. He identified these stages as:

1. **ALARM REACTION** – the body's first stress response that ignites fight or flight
2. **RESISTANCE** – where the body has to keep working harder to deal with the strains or demands of the stressful environment
3. **EXHAUSTION** – the body is now unable to maintain normal functioning and breaks down

However, you may or may not pass through all of these stages, depending on past experience, the type of stressor(s), how you perceive it, and what supports you have. As Dr Clark pointed out, it is the degree and intensity of stress that raises your cholesterol levels. Furthermore, you would be experiencing the second or third stages of stress if you were maintaining high cholesterol levels.

Encouragement

“So then, do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Today has enough trouble of its own.”

Matthew 6:34 (NET)

How can managing stress lower your cholesterol levels?

As Dr Clark pointed out, stress causes a release of large amounts of cortisol (as well as adrenaline), which elevates the blood sugars. A consequence of this is that too much insulin is released which not only plummets your blood sugar levels, it also raises your blood cholesterol. Hence, as you become more stressed your blood cholesterol levels keep rising. When you understand the three stages of stress and identify your stress response, you then need to work on reducing your stress levels which in turn will help decrease your cholesterol levels. So what stage(s) of stress are you experiencing? If you learn to manage the ALARM reaction then you will normalize your body's response to stress and not maintain high levels of cortisol and adrenaline. Both of these when maintained also cause other problems such as toxicity and inflammation in your body. Working on managing your stress levels gives you control over many modern day health problems, not just the unhealthy high cholesterol.

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Stress Management Tool Kit

Managing your stress levels

1. Learn to be more aware of your stress symptoms: racing heart, rapid short shallow breathing, sweaty palms, feeling agitated or anxious, stomach churning (too much acid), muscle tension, headaches, insomnia, change in appetite etc.
2. Balancing the heart-brain connection rapidly reduces stress symptoms and keeps you focused in the present moment. It helps to switch off the adrenals, wind down, and feel calm and relaxed. Try this easy breathing technique I call heart-focused breathing. Put your hand on your heart and focus on taking slow and even breaths into the area where your hand is, then into the lungs (to the count of 5 in and 5 out). Also try to think of something you appreciate that generates a good heart feeling or connection.
3. Learn to live in the present moment. Be aware of where your mind is focused at any given time. The past has gone and the future hasn't happened yet. It is stressful to ruminate on past problems as this causes depression and it's dangerous to project our future fears as this causes anxiety. Where your mind and thinking is focused can negatively or positively affect your body and brain function.
4. Check out your beliefs and the types of thoughts you have because what you believe feeds your thoughts, what you think results in how you feel, which then helps to determine behaviors, actions and your physiological response. It's a chain reaction with multiple feedback loops from the brain to the body so make it a positive, not a negative loop.
5. Other ways to calm your heart rate and focus your mind is by enjoying nature; pet therapy; exercising; drinking herbal teas such as chamomile, lemon balm or passion flower; as well as to pray and meditate on a loving God.

Disclaimer: This fact sheet presents principles designed to promote good health and is not intended to take the place of personalised professional care. The opinions and ideas expressed are those of the writers. Readers are encouraged to draw their own conclusions about the information presented.