Feeding The Irrational Fear of Cholesterol

by Owen R. Fonorow, ©2002

I admit my surprise when the public school Physical Education department asked my permission to screen our eleven-year-old for elevated cholesterol. Then I thought: you can never be too young to learn the health benefits of the cholesterol lowering drugs. Since the faculty at our local grade school may actually believe that such tests could in some way have value and might benefit sixth grade children, my concern that these tests might inadvertently brainwash them about the hazards of cholesterol is probably misplaced. Still, I do not believe that public schools should act like marketing arms for pharmaceutical companies.

So what is it about cholesterol that strikes such fear into the hearts of men, women and children? In 1998 the American Medical Association (AMA) held a press conference and told doctors that public concern over elevated cholesterol was not warranted, and in the same year the AMA also warned that common cholesterol lowering drugs (statins) are carcinogenic, saying:

"All members of the two most popular classes of lipid-lowering drugs (the fibrates and the statins) cause cancer in rodents, in some cases at levels of animal exposure close to those prescribed to humans." More recently, one of these drugs, Baycol, was linked to hundreds of deaths and removed from the market by the US Federal Drug Administration (FDA). See:http://abcnews.go.com/sections/living/DaiIyNews/ baycol010808.html.

Far from being something we or our children should have concern about, much less fear, ordinary cholesterol is a miracle of evolution. Vitamin-like, cholesterol is a very important substance that makes it possible to transport life-giving fat soluble substances throughout the body using the water of the blood stream. With it, our bodies make essential hormones and vitamin D (with sunlight). Low cholesterol is a symptom of depression and cancer. It is so important that if cholesterol intake is restricted, our livers make more.

CHOLESTEROL PRIMER

The consensus on cholesterol seems to be: the lower the better. However, that is not always the case, according to Michael and Mary Dan Eades, M.Ds., authors of *Protein Power* (Bantam Books, 1996). Far from being a health destroyer, cholesterol is absolutely essential for life. The authors write:

"Although most people think of it as being 'fat in the blood,' only seven percent of the body's cholesterol is found there. In fact, cholesterol is not really fat at all; it's a pearly-colored, waxy, solid alcohol that is soapy to the touch. The bulk of the cholesterol in your body, the other 93 percent, is located in every cell of the body, where its unique waxy, soapy consistency provides the cell membranes with their structural integrity and regulates the flow of nutrients into - and waste products out of - the cells.

In addition, among its other diverse and essential functions are these:

- cholesterol is the building block from which your body makes several important hormones;
- the adrenal hormones aldosterone, which helps regulate blood pressure and hydrocortisone, the Body's naturalsteroid;
- and the sex hormones (estrogen and testosterone).

If you don't have enough cholesterol, you won't make enough "sex hormones."

Cholesterol is the main component of bile acids, which aid in the digestion of foods, particularly fatty foods. Without cholesterol we could not absorb the essential fat-soluble vitamins A, D, E and K from the food we eat.

Cholesterol is necessary for normal growth and development of the brain and nervous system. Cholesterol coats the nerves and makes the transmission of nerve impulses possible.

Cholesterol gives skin its ability to shed water.

Cholesterol is a precursor of vitamin D in the skin. When exposed to sunlight, this precursor molecule is converted to its active form for use in the body.

Cholesterol is important for normal growth and repair of tissues since every cell membrane and the organelles (the tiny structures inside the cells which carry out specific functions) within the cells are rich in cholesterol. For this reason newborn animals feed on milk or other cholesterol-rich foods, such as the yolks of eggs, which are there to provide food for the developing bird or chick embryos.

Cholesterol plays a major role in the transportation of triglycerides - blood fats - through the circulatory system.

A quick review of this list should give you a better idea of what cholesterol does and dispel any notion that it is a destroyer of health to be feared and avoided at all costs. Far from being a serial killer, cholesterol is absolutely essential for good health; without it you would die. Without cholesterol we would lose the strength and stability of our cells, rendering them much less resistant to invasion by infection and malignancy. In fact, a grave sign of serious illness, such as cancer development or crippling arthritis, is a falling cholesterol level."

Dangers Of Lipid Lowering Drugs

There is little evidence that lowering cholesterol protects human beings from heart disease. In fact, according to the Life Extension Foundation, of those who suffer heart attacks under age 50, more than 50 percent have no recognized risk factors.

According to noted nutrition expert Earl Mindell in his recent book *Prescription Alternatives, "* a victim of negative press, cholesterol is an essential component of the production of the steroid hormones and in nerve function as well as other essential body processes... First, there is absolutely no evidence anywhere that normal cholesterol floating around in the blood does any harm. In fact, cholesterol is the building block for all your steroid hormones, which includes all the sex hormones and the cortisones. Even slightly low levels of cholesterol are associated with depression, suicide, and lung cancer in older women... For most people, eating high cholesterol foods does not raise cholesterol."

Mindell further states: "While a cholesterol-lowering drug will usually do a very good job of lowering your cholesterol, there's scant, if any, evidence that it will help you live longer or reduce your risk of heart attack unless you are extremely ill or have just suffered from a heart attack... There are no studies showing that women benefit from these drugs - all the studies showing even marginal benefits have been done on men. Nor are there any studies showing that they reduce heart attacks or death in men aged 65 to 75. Since heart disease takes decades to develop, it's highly unlikely that cholesterol-lowering drugs will help anyone over the age of 75. That leaves men aged 35 to 55, but even here the evidence of benefit is slim, and the possible side effects are huge... If the American public had even a clue of how destructive these drugs are, they wouldn't touch them except in an emergency... Every information sheet on the most commonly prescribed cholesterol-lowering drugs will tell you that they cause cancer in rodents when taken long term in relatively normal doses. It's also well-known that they can cause severe emotional imbalances in men, along with a wide array of life-threatening side effects... The wisest course of action is to avoid these drugs."

Why Does Cholesterol Accumulate In The Arteries?

Drug company advertising for cholesterol lowering drugs gives the impression that excessive cholesterol in the blood simply deposits on the artery wall, and that lowering cholesterol levels stops that process. Mindell and others point out that high cholesterol is a symptom of an underlying nutritional deficiency and/or toxicity that damages the arteries, rather than the cause.

Cholesterol Drugs - A Death Sentence?

Lipid lowering drugs inhibit the formation of cholesterol by the liver; some might say they "damage" the liver. This mechanism also has other unwanted effects. From the Internet: "In 1987, Merck made headlines when it came out with Mevacor (lovastatin), the first cholesterol-lowering statin drug. Statins block enzyme pathways involved in the production of cholesterol, thereby lowering cholesterol levels. But that's not all these drugs do. The same

enzymes that are involved in the production of cholesterol are also required for the production of an essential compound called coenzyme Q10; not surprisingly, lower cholesterol levels in statin users are accompanied by reduced levels of coenzyme Q 10 (CoQ10).

"Coenzyme Q10 - also called ubiquinone, which means "occurring everywhere" - plays an important role in the manufacture of ATP, the fuel that runs cellular processes. Though it is present in every cell in your body, it is especially concentrated in the very active cells of your heart. Depriving the heart of CoQ10 is like removing a spark plug from your engine - it just won't work. Low levels of CoQ10 are implicated in virtually all cardiovascular diseases, including angina, hypertension, cardiomyopathy and congestive heart failure.

"Merck knew that statins deplete CoQ10, and knew that this could contribute to heart disease. In 1990, this drug manufacturer sought and received a patent for Mevacor and other statin drugs formulated with up to 1,000 mg of coenzyme Q10 to prevent or alleviate cardiomyopathy, a serious condition that can cause congestive heart failure. However, Merck has not brought these combination products to market, nor has this drug company educated physicians on the important of supplementing CoQ10 to offset the dangers of these drugs to the heart. Because they hold the patent, other drug companies are prevented from coming out with a statin/CoQ10 product.

"If you're taking a statin drug (Zocor, Provacol, etc.), don't wait for your doctor to warn you of the substantial risks. Consider this fact: in the last 15 years (roughly the time that statins have been on the market), the incidence of congestive heart failure has tripled. If you want to avoid becoming a statistic, it is imperative that you take 200 mg of coenzyme Q10 daily."

Low Cholesterol Linked To Stroke

According to Dr. Joseph Mercola, "High cholesterol is a well-known risk factor for stroke. But new research suggests that low levels of cholesterol in the blood may also increase stroke risk. The study linking low cholesterol to increased stroke risk was presented recently at the 24th American Heart Association Conference on Stroke and Cerebral Circulation. About 80% of all strokes are ischemic, and 20% are hemorrhagic." See: http://www.mercola.com/1999/feb/14/lowcholesterol.htm

Lp(a) The Really Bad Cholesterol

Much evidence is accumulating that so-called "bad" (LDL) cholesterol is no more dangerous than calcium. However, there is a component of cholesterol, a lipid that used to be grouped with LDL, that does signal danger when it is elevated. Linus Pauling and Matthias Rath singled out lipoprotein(a) or Lp(a), as the significant risk factor in heart disease. Under their theory, Lp(a) acts as a surrogate for chronic low vitamin C. (See www.PaulingTherapy.com). Unfortunately, lipid lowering drugs do not lower Lp(a). A recent Oxford meta analysis (Sept., 2000) found that people with elevated Lp(a) are 70% more likely to suffer a heart attack or stroke. (See: http://www.intemetwks.com/pauling/ 1pa090400.htm1)

The Vitamin C Foundation has been investigating reports that high amounts of vitamin C, lysine and proline will lower elevated levels of Lp(a) in the blood after several months.

Cholesterol Screening In Kids Is Madness

With this information in mind, I volunteered to address the junior high school student body so 'that the students might hear another point of view. I even offered to show Linus Pauling's video, "Heart Disease: A Unified Theory." Our children should realize that not everyone agrees that elevated cholesterol is to be feared or the cause of heart problems. So far there has been no response to my offer. www.vitaminCfoundation.org ; www.paulingtherapy.com