

Myths around Diet, Cholesterol and Heart Health

A tool to help you bust the myths that patients bring into the consulting room

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With lots of conflicting messages in the media regarding diet and heart health - it's no wonder that some of us are confused as to how to advise our patients - especially if they come with the latest research findings or, worse, myths picked up from friends, family and the media. Here we dispel some of these myths in a handy format that you can cut out and keep.

Myth: "I've heard that saturated fat isn't bad for my heart after all, so why shouldn't I eat butter rather than 'low fat' spreads?"

Fact: Three saturated fats: lauric, myristic and palmitic acids increase the levels of LDL-cholesterol in the blood. These fats are found in a range of animal foods (fatty meats, butter, lard, full fat dairy, palm and coconut oils). Lowering saturated fat and, very importantly, replacing it with unsaturated fats, has been shown to lower both LDL-cholesterol and cardiovascular events.

Myth: "I only eat foods low in fat so I know my diet is heart healthy."

Fact: The cardiovascular benefits described above are only achieved when saturated fat is replaced with polyunsaturated fats (PUFA) and monounsaturated fats (MUFA). These are best found in oils and spreads made from olives, nuts and seeds, from the nuts and seeds themselves and from foods such as avocado and oily fish. About a third of our energy should be provided by fat (about 70g) and of this no more than a third should be the saturated kind. Replacing saturated fat with carbohydrates just does not have the same benefits.

Myth: "Yes my cholesterol level is high, but I don't have any other risk factors so surely that doesn't matter?"

Fact: Exposure to high levels of cholesterol over time can result in cardiovascular disease, regardless of whether you have other risk factors. The Cholesterol Treatment Trialists Collaboration (CTTC), involving over 90,000 people, showed that major vascular events can be reduced by about one fifth for every mmol/l reduction in LDL-cholesterol across all groups. Further to this the World Health Organisation have attributed a third of deaths worldwide to raised cholesterol. INTERHEART estimated that 45% of heart attacks in Western Europe are due to abnormal blood lipids. They concluded that having abnormal lipid levels increases the risk of a heart attack by 3 times when compared to those people with normal lipids.

Myth: "It's not saturated fat that's to blame it's trans fats."

Fact: Trans fats are produced from the heating of unsaturated fats to high temperatures, often during industrial processing. Because trans fats

increase LDL cholesterol and also lower HDL cholesterol this joint effect makes them a big problem. However the food industry has removed much of the trans fats from our diet so it is less of a concern. And many of us are still consuming more saturated fat than is recommended.

Myth: "I'm not losing weight with the diet advice you gave me so what's the point of carrying on?"

Fact: It is not so much about how much we weigh or the amount of fat we have, but where on the body we store it. People with central obesity often store excess fat in and around their liver, heart and pancreas and this is associated with metabolic syndrome and unhealthy patterns of cholesterol. So, any changes made to diet and activity levels should focus on waist reduction not weight reduction. Routinely measuring waist circumference in clinic is therefore a good addition to weight and BMI and can help motivate patients.

Myth: "I'm young, fit and slim so surely I can't have high cholesterol?"

Fact: Cholesterol is partly genetically determined, so it's just not possible to second guess a person's cholesterol level without a blood test. Family history of high cholesterol or early heart disease, central obesity or an unhealthy diet and lifestyle are all indicators that cholesterol might be high.

Myth: "I'm on a statin so I don't need to worry about my diet."

Fact: Whether you are on a statin or not, eating a healthy diet is still an important part of maintaining healthy cholesterol levels. The cholesterol lowering effects of a healthy diet and a statin are additive.

Myth: "I've started to use coconut oil as I've heard it's good for heart health."

Fact: Coconut oil is solid at room temperature so there should be no surprise that it is really high in saturated fat - largely lauric and myristic acids. Both these fats increase your LDL cholesterol. Some have suggested that because lauric acid also raises HDL cholesterol it might have health benefits. However the small increase in HDL-cholesterol is far outweighed by the negative increase in LDL cholesterol.

So what is a heart healthy diet?

- ✓ Foods high in saturated fat swapped for those containing unsaturated fats.
- ✓ Rich in whole grains.
- ✓ Rich in fruit and vegetables.
- ✓ At least two portions of fish per week, one of them oily.

Where cholesterol is a problem include cholesterol busters:

- ✓ Vegetable proteins such as nuts, soya and quorn.
- ✓ Soluble fibres such as oats, barley, beans, peas and lentils.
- ✓ Foods fortified with added plant sterols and stanols.

For more information, references and to download this factsheet visit: www.heartuk.org.uk/myths

SHREDDED WHEAT is approved by HEART UK - The Cholesterol Charity.

✓ No added sugar

✓ No added salt

✓ Low in saturated fat