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Heart to Heart Talk

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Aging and Cholesterol

Why do we age?

Aging is a natural process brought on by the daily wear and tear in our system and bodily function. Each particular species has a maximum life span, determined by our DNA, among others. However, environmental factors do greatly influence the actual longevity, especially among us humans, who are well known to abuse ourselves. Medical literature and the bible have documented man attaining the age of 150 or older. With the advent of modern civilization and the self-abusive lifestyle homosapiens have developed, man's life span, in spite of today's great advances in medical technology, has been greatly shortened. While it is naturally possible to stay young longer and maximize our longevity, we, humans, seem to have placed a lot of barriers (risk factors) ourselves to preclude that natural potential of staying young longer and living to the "ripe old age" of, say 150 or 180, from happening. These risk factors include high cholesterol diet, smoking, alcohol excess, sedentary lifestyle, and obesity (no matter how mild), etc.

Are we really as old as our arteries?

Yes, we are. If we keep our arteries young, we will look, feel and remain young longer. Our skin, flesh, tendons, bones, and all other organs and tissues in our body are supplied by arteries that provide the necessary oxygen and nutrition to every cell and tissue of our body. If these arteries are clogged by cholesterol deposits, these tissues and organs (including our skin) receive much less oxygen and nutrition, and age much faster. As a result, the elasticity of the skin, for example, is reduced and the skin starts to loosen and sag, wrinkles form, and its youthful appearance disappears. If you look at your friends or relatives, people you know, you will observe that those who take good care of their health (and therefore, their arteries) look healthier, much younger and more active than those who do not.

What is cholesterol?

Cholesterol is a sterol, a complex alcohol constituent of animal fats and oils. This is the substance that forms the plaques which adheres to the inner wall of arteries causing hardening of the arteries and stenoses (blockages), many leading to heart attacks, strokes, or poor leg circulation.

Is there such a thing as “good” cholesterol?

Yes, it is called High Density Lipoprotein (HDL), and the bad cholesterol is called the Low Density Lipoprotein (LDL). For better health, a person should have a high level of the HDL and low level of LDL. These two triglycerides or lipids are important risk variables, hence their serum (blood) levels are also checked, together with Total Serum Cholesterol level.

Where does our body get cholesterol from?

While our liver produces (endogenous) cholesterol, the main source of (exogenous) cholesterol in our body and the blood is from the food we eat. Food that are high in cholesterol include: egg yolk, pork, beef (and other red meats), butter, lard, and other dairy products.

Does milk contain cholesterol?

Yes, but the 2% milk, skim milk, or reduced cholesterol milk have been reconstituted to attain the reduction in cholesterol in them, and marketed as such. For young children, skim milk is not recommended, unless they are hyperlipidemic (with high triglyceride level, especially the LDL). Two percent milk is acceptable, but not lower.

How much fat is in our usual diet?

The average U.S. diet contains about 37% total calories as fat. In the Philippines, this may even be as much as 45%, which is a very unhealthy diet. Even 37% is too high, and the American Heart Association recommends that this needs to be reduced to 10% to have a major effect in heart attack, stroke and cancer prevention.

What are the types of dietary fats?

There are three kinds: saturated, monosaturated, and polyunsaturated. Sources of saturated fats are meat, non-skim dairy products, artificially hydrogenated vegetable oils. Monosaturated fats are found in olive oil and cannola oil. Polyunsaturated fats are from Omega-3 (sea plankton, deep-sea cold water fatty

fish, like salmon, tuna, mackerel), and from Omega-6 oils in cultivated vegetable oils (like corn oil).

Is pork white meat?

No, pork is red meat, just like beef is red meat. Both are high in cholesterol and fats. Obviously aimed at confusing the public to promote pork, a television ad in the United States, featuring actor Robert Mitchum as its spokesman, says “Pork, the other white meat.” This is a misrepresentation and a great public disservice.

How about chicken meat?

Chicken breast is white meat, lower in cholesterol compared to pork or beef, but chicken skin is very high in cholesterol. The dark chicken meat (neck, wings, back, legs) is slightly higher in cholesterol compared the breast portion.

Why does the fatty portion of any meat taste good?

The portions of the meat that is “loaded” with fats, such as skin, intestines, omentum (chicharon bulaklak), taste better because the taste of the food we eat is in the cholesterol content of the food. If cholesterol is totally removed scientifically from beef or pork, for instance, these meats will taste like rope fibers...flat and tasteless. The higher the cholesterol content of the food, the better it tastes, but the worse it is for our health.

Does fish meat have fats?

It does, but the fats in fish meat is the good kind, one that is good for the heart and blood vessels. They are called Omega-3 oils. Regularly eating only fish (not together with pork, beef, eggs, butter, etc.) has been scientifically shown to lower the incidence or risk of sudden cardiac death. These oils (eicosapentaenoic acid and docosahexaenoic acid) have also been shown to lower serum triglycerides and “bad cholesterol,” and makes blood thinner and less prone to clot, and, therefore, slows down hardening of the artery.

What is the normal level of serum cholesterol?

The National Cholesterol Education Program (NCEP) defines the normal Total Cholesterol level as levels less than 200 mg/dL or 5.18 mmol/L. However, new medical studies have shown that this current “normal level” is still too high to be effective in lowering the risk of heart attacks and strokes. The predominant new concept today for desirable level is about 150-160 mg/dL. The level of triglycerides is

also very important, if not more, in the maintenance of cardiovascular health. It is wise to have a screening and baseline cholesterol and triglyceride blood tests.

How does one lower his/her cholesterol level?

The initial step, which is quite successful in majority of people, is by not eating red meats or meat products made of pork or beef, non-skim dairy products, eggs (the yolk of which is in itself very high in cholesterol). The diet should consist of fish, vegetables, white chicken meat (no skin) and fruits. Indulging a bit in red meats during the holidays is acceptable, except among those whose cholesterol and LDL are very high and the HDL is very low. If this recommended diet regimen is followed religiously, chances are the cholesterol and triglyceride levels will come down to the desired levels. Medications to lower the cholesterol and triglyceride levels are reserved for those where weeks of strict fish, vegetable, and fruit diet has failed. Only one out of 500 of these persons has a genetic predisposition to having familial high cholesterol level. While that single individual has an excuse to have elevated serum cholesterol, the 499 of us, do not. We simply abuse ourselves to death. There are various medications available today to lower serum cholesterol. Your physician will be a most beneficial partner in planning an effective strategy for you. Remember: prevention is the best cure for any malady.