Cholesterol and Food

True or false? The best way to keep your blood cholesterol in check is to avoid foods that are high in cholesterol. True or false? Cholesterol in the food you eat goes directly into your bloodstream and invariably raises your cholesterol levels. True or false? You should avoid shellfish; shellfish is high in cholesterol.

The answers? False. False. False. Cholesterol is one of the most misunderstood areas of nutrition. The cholesterol in food—called “dietary cholesterol”— is chemically the same as the cholesterol in your bloodstream, which is called “serum cholesterol.” But that is where the similarities end. The body manufactures most of its serum cholesterol; some is also absorbed from the foods you eat. Dietary cholesterol is found only in foods of animal nature, never in foods from plant sources, even if they contain fat.

It’s true that dietary cholesterol can influence the makeup of your serum cholesterol. But a far stronger influence is the amount of saturated fat in your diet. “Clearly, the issue is saturated fat,” says Nancy D. Ernst, Ph.D., R.D., nutrition coordinator at the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute. Saturated fats come mainly from animal-based foods like meat, poultry, butter, whole milk and whole milk products and from coconut, palm and palm kernel oils. These foods trigger the liver to make more low-density lipoprotein and total cholesterol.

Fat is consumed in large quantities, cholesterol in tiny quantities. The American Dietetic Association says on average, people consume 33 percent of their calories from total fat. But even if you ate three times the recommended limit of cholesterol, it would take more than a year to consume a pound. That’s why fat is generally measured in grams, while cholesterol is measured in milligrams (a thousandth of a gram).

For healthy Americans after the age of two, no more than 30 percent of total calories should be from fat. Remember that total fat equals saturated fats plus monounsaturated fats plus polyunsaturated fats. Broken down, the “no more than 30 percent guideline” looks like this: 7–10 percent of total calories from saturated fats; 10–15 percent from monounsaturated fats; and about 10 percent from polyunsaturated fats. Monounsaturated fats include canola, nut and olive oils. Polyunsaturated fats include corn, safflower, sesame, sunflower and soybean oils, and often are the fat in seafood. Additionally, no matter what the calorie intake, the cholesterol guideline for healthy individuals is no more than 300 mg per day.

Trans fat, found in commercially baked goods and in margarine, as well as in the oils most restaurants use, also raises the cholesterol levels in your body. Most trans fat in the diet come from hydrogenated fats. Your clue for trans fats when looking at food labels are the words “hydrogenated vegetable oil” or “hydrogenated fat.”

“Forbidden” foods—notably eggs, liver and shellfish—can have a place in a “heart-healthy” diet if used wisely. Some foods—notably crabs and lobsters—are actually among the healthiest choices you can make. Here’s a look at these foods.

Eggs: All They’re Cracked Up to Be
It’s true that eggs pack a hefty dose of cholesterol—about 213 mg for a large egg, compared with a recommended daily limit of 300 mg. But they’re relatively low in saturated fat compared with most cuts of meat. And they’re an excellent source of essential nutrients, including calcium, iron, vitamins D, A, and B and a healthy amount of protein. But if you’re like many Americans, you may believe that eggs are tiny time bombs of cholesterol.

The fear of eggs stems from an incorrect but deeply ingrained assumption that cholesterol in foods raises “serum” levels of cholesterol. But dietary cholesterol, though clearly a factor, has at most only a modest effect on blood cholesterol levels. Just how much effect it has depends upon many factors, including your genetic makeup, exercise habits and lifestyle choices.

Where your diet is concerned, saturated fat—not cholesterol—is the predominant consideration.

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“Saturated fat has a more powerful and more straightforward effect on serum cholesterol,” says Margo A. Denke, M.D., associate professor of internal medicine at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center. That’s good news for egg lovers, since one large egg has less than 2 grams of saturated fat—less than a small roasted chicken leg with skin.

Moderation is key. There’s no limit on egg whites, however, since all the fat and cholesterol is in the yolk.

**Shellfish: Good Food with a Bad Reputation**

Anyone who’s trying to cut their cholesterol knows that shellfish are a no-no, right? Wrong. “People think shellfish is high in cholesterol, but that’s just not the case,” says Dr. Ernst. In fact, most shellfish are slightly lower in cholesterol than meat and poultry. And in the more crucial category—saturated fat—shellfish are significantly better for you.

Shellfish have minimal saturated fat content and very low total fat—less than a gram per 3-ounce serving. Three ounces of crabmeat, for example, have only 43 mg of cholesterol and only 0.3 gram of saturated fat. Three ounces of steamed lobster meat? Just 61 mg of cholesterol and 0.1 gram of saturated fat. That’s about the same amount of saturated fat as an apple. You’d have to eat more than 10 pounds of most shellfish before you would reach your daily fat limit. By comparison, a 3-ounce serving of liver, the most commonly eaten organ meat, chalks up more than approximately 400 mg of cholesterol. That would put you, in just one meal, over the 300-mg daily limit.

Does that mean you can never eat liver?

To the contrary. The 300-mg cap, explains Dr. Denke, is meant as a guide—not a hard and fast rule. “It’s your diet over time that’s important,” she says. “You can still eat liver, but you should weight the other elements of your diet to balance it out over time, keeping your average daily cholesterol intake over the course of a few days or a week at 300 milligrams.”

Dr. Denke advises that you can keep your overall diet in balance by remembering this general rule: 25 mg of dietary cholesterol has roughly the same cholesterol-raising potential as 1 gram of saturated fat. By that measure, the 400 mg of cholesterol in a 3-ounce serving of liver is roughly equivalent to eating 16 grams of saturated fat.

Whether you choose the steak or the liver, you’re going to put a significant dent in your fat budget for the day. That means you should avoid fatty foods for a bit. Even two tablespoons of salad dressing could put you over. “Go vegetarian for the next meal or two,” Ms. Karmally suggests.

The bottom line is: If you love liver, there’s no reason to give it up entirely. But don’t go overboard. “Try to eat small portions,” advises Ms. Karmally, “and use beans, grains, rice and pasta to stretch the meat.”