

DIETARY FATS

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Triglycerides could trigger heart attack

BY DIANA K. SUGG
The Baltimore Sun

From the sugar-covered butter balls that your mother makes to roast beef, cheesecake and even the delicate fizz of champagne, you've just survived the season for fats.

Coupled with too little exercise, these foods can be enough to tip some people into a heart attack. Even the healthy put on pounds over the holidays — 3 to 5, on average.

Luckily, researchers are learning more about fats and the chemical form in which they exist in foods and in the body. Called triglycerides, the substances were the subject of a recent study by researchers at the University of Maryland Medical Center.

They found that these fats, at levels much lower than previously thought, can increase a person's risk of heart disease. According to another new report, by researchers in Chicago, triglycerides can change the blood's consistency from a flowing river into a milkshake, thick and sluggish, and more likely to form blood clots.

"There are several lines of data that have now shown that triglycerides are more important than we thought they were before," said Dr. Robert S. Rosenson, of Rush Presbyterian St. Luke's Medical Center. At the University of Maryland, other researchers



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DANGER, DANGER: Foods rich in saturated fat, like ice cream, are prime sources of bad triglycerides.

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See TRIGLYCERIDES on PAGE C2

limelight for so many years. ... Now we realize that we may have been missing the boat for so many years with triglycerides," said Dr. Michael Miller, director of preventive cardiology at the University of Maryland Medical Center.

When blood is drawn and left overnight, triglycerides appear as a creamy layer on the blood. After a person eats fatty foods, triglycerides will clear from the bloodstream in several hours. But people with higher levels, over time, risk having the triglycerides contribute to a buildup of plaque in the arteries.

Rosenson has shown that higher levels of triglycerides thicken the body's blood. That makes it harder for the heart to pump, prevents the blood from delivering nutrients to tissues and, by increasing the drag on blood vessels, damages their linings. The thicker blood raises the chances of a blood clot, Rosenson said, and most heart attacks are caused by blood clots.

The National Cholesterol Education Program says triglyceride levels of less than 200 are normal. But Miller's study found that even people with levels of 100 were more than twice as likely to suffer future heart disease as those with less triglyceride.

"What we found was actually surprising a lot of people," Miller said. "Our study shows for the first time that only mildly elevated triglyceride levels appear to enhance the risk of heart disease events."

have come up with a potential antidote:

Taking huge doses of vitamins before chomping on high-fat foods like a cheeseburger and fries may protect blood vessels.

"We joke now that maybe McDonald's should serve you the vitamins before they serve the meal ... or mix them in the food," said Dr. Gary D. Plotnick, professor of medicine and director of echocardiography at the University of Maryland School of Medicine.

Plotnick's study, though, is small, and the results preliminary.

What is certain is that triglycerides, often neglected as attention has focused on cholesterol, are emerging as an independent risk factor for heart disease. In a few years, many people may keep track of their triglyceride levels, just as they do with cholesterol.

The two are different compounds. Cholesterol is a waxy substance; triglycerides are fats. But both are in the blood, both can contribute to heart disease, and both have so-called "good" and "bad" forms.

Bad triglycerides, for instance, are generally found in foods rich in saturated fat, such as ice cream, cheese, hot dogs and fried foods. Good triglycerides, which can reduce one's level of fat, are found in certain fish — salmon, sardines, mackerel, herring, and tuna packed in water.

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