



Ask Anya

Anya Todd is a vegan registered and licensed dietitian who recently accepted a position at Rainbow Babies & Children's Hospital in Cleveland. She looks forward to teaching youngsters about the benefits of eating their fruits & vegetables.

Q: *I hear plant foods don't have cholesterol. Do I need to worry about my cholesterol levels as a vegan?*

Maybe. Should you be aware of your levels? Definitely. Cholesterol has specific functions within our bodies, such as hormone production and maintaining cell membranes. Luckily, our bodies manufacture all the cholesterol that is required. Therefore, anything we consume is going above and beyond what is needed, and can possibly cause problems.

Animal products are the only sources of dietary cholesterol. So, if you are already consuming a vegan diet, a good portion of your cholesterol worries can go away; however, don't break out the celebratory vegan cupcake yet. Much research has shown that your saturated and trans fat intakes have more effects on your body's cholesterol production than previously believed. Translation: vegans consuming a diet rich in hydrogenated oils increase their risk of having higher cholesterol levels. The "junk-food" vegan is not immune to the cardiovascular effects of cholesterol.

Elevated cholesterol levels can lead to cardiovascular disease, which opens the door to a plethora of ailments, including heart attacks and strokes. Heart disease is the number one killer in our country. It is referred to by medical professionals, including the renowned Dr. T. Colin Campbell, author of *The China Study*, as "a disease of affluence" because it is a condition that exists predominately in Westernized cultures where the hamburgers are plentiful and the expanding waist sizes show it. Thousands of invasive medical procedures are performed every day in hospitals from LA to NYC to repair the cardiac damage caused by the disease.



Many of the procedures will need to be done again, as they are only bandages to the underlying problem for the majority of patients – poor diet.

Studies across the board show that vegans have lower blood cholesterol levels than their vegetarian and omnivorous counterparts. Your cholesterol levels are broken down into three parts: HDL, LDL, and triglycerides. HDL is considered the "good" cholesterol, while both LDL and triglycerides have deleterious effects. It is important to note that your total cholesterol level is a reflection of all three values combined. The current recommendation is for a cholesterol level under 200 mg/dl; however, there is much belief that levels of 150 mg/dl are more desirable based on population studies.

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It is true that there is a genetic component to your risk of having elevated cholesterol – and if that is the category into which you fall, feel free to curse your Grandpa Floyd up and down. Yet, for most of us, the choices we make about what foods we put on our plates make all the difference.

When we speak of cardiac health, we must also mention that fiber, Vitamin B12 and Omega-3 fatty acids are also important nutrients to consume regularly. A whole foods vegan diet not only reduces your risk of cardiovascular disease, but it can also lower your risk of other chronic diseases of affluence, like cancer and diabetes. Now that is reason for a celebratory vegan bran muffin!