Impact of diet, exercise, and alcohol use on triglycerides [1]

(1) Dear Alice,

What are triglycerides and how do you get the count down from diet or exercise, or what foods to avoid?

(2) Dear Alice,

What does it mean if you have a high triglyceride level and what does it have to do with drinking?

Signed,

Don't mix?

Answer

Dear Reader and Don't mix?,

A quick biology review might help here: triglycerides are the major form of fat in your body and in food. Besides supplying your body with essential fatty acids, they also insulate the body, supply and store energy, and transport fat-soluble vitamins. As a bonus, triglycerides add flavor and texture to foods (which can help satisfy your hunger!). Here's where it gets a little complicated. Fats are carried through the bloodstream by various lipoproteins, including low density lipoproteins (LDL) and high density lipoproteins (HDL). As the amount of triglycerides in the lipoproteins increases, the density of lipoproteins decreases. So, a high triglyceride level would imply a higher LDL level and/or a lower HDL-cholesterol level, both of which can increase your risk for serious conditions such as heart disease, heart attack, and stroke. The lifestyle factors you've both identified, such as diet, physical activity, and alcohol use, all can have an impact on your triglyceride levels, and in turn, risks to your health.

In order to stave off the potential health risks (and to answer both of your questions), there are a variety of strategies that can help lower your triglyceride levels:

- **Improved diet:** Modifying your diet is an excellent way to manage your triglyceride levels. Cutting back on calories is key because extra calories are immediately transformed into triglycerides and stored in your body as fat. Having fewer sugary foods
and drinks is a good idea, as is reducing your cholesterol intake. To that end, you might replace egg yolks or whole eggs for egg whites. It's also recommended to steer clear of foods high in trans fat. Check food labels? if partially hydrogenated oil is listed as an ingredient, it means the product contains trans fat.

- **Increased physical activity**: Ramping up your workouts is another way to keep triglycerides under control. Getting active on the regular helps raise your HDL levels (the "good" cholesterol) and lower your LDL levels (the "bad" cholesterol). It's also a great way to burn calories! Try getting at least 30 minutes of physical activity most days (remember, even just taking the stairs instead of the elevator counts as physical activity!). You don't have to hit the gym to get those 30 minutes in? instead of watching a movie with your buddies, suggest a hike, a bike ride, or maybe even go out dancing!

- **Reduced consumption of alcohol**: Another smart move might be reducing your alcohol intake. To answer your question specifically, Don't mix? alcohol is full of calories (and sugar) and any extra calories turn into triglycerides, which are then stored in your body as fat. This means that high alcohol consumption can increase your triglyceride levels. Studies have shown that alcohol can have varying effects on a person's triglyceride levels depending on their body composition. In obese individuals, alcohol appears to have a more dramatic effect on triglyceride levels than it does in leaner individuals. Researchers have found that obese individuals show a much more elevated blood triglyceride level after consuming alcohol. Regardless, both lean and obese individuals can have high triglyceride levels, so most health professionals recommend drinking less alcohol or cutting out alcohol entirely if you're trying to manage your triglyceride levels.

It's always a good idea to talk with your health care provider before making major changes to your diet or exercise routine. If your triglyceride levels don't respond to the lifestyle changes mentioned, s/he may be able to prescribe certain medications. Either way, your provider will be able to help you to determine what strategies will be safest and most effective for you to keep your triglycerides in check. Best of luck as you "tri" using these strategies!

Alice!
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