Impact of diet, physical activity, 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 most common form of fat in the body. Any calories consumed that aren’t burned off are converted into triglycerides. These fats help insulate the body, supply and store energy, and transport fat-soluble vitamins. Here’s where it gets a little complicated: there’s evidence to suggest that when a person has high triglyceride levels in combination with increased low density lipoproteins (LDL) and decreased high density lipoproteins (HDL) [2], they’re at an increased risk for serious conditions such as heart disease [3], heart attack [4], and stroke [5]. Eating a balanced diet, being regularly physically active, and limiting alcohol intake helps reduce the amount of excess calories, thereby decreasing triglyceride levels.

In order to stave off some potential health risks, here’s a bit more about some of the recommended strategies to help lower triglyceride levels:

- **Eating a balanced diet**: Following a diet that meets but doesn’t exceed your energy needs is an excellent way to manage your triglyceride levels. Focusing on whole foods such as fruits, vegetables, and whole grains and limiting foods high in sugar as well as trans and saturated fats will help fuel your body without the excess calorie intake that may be converted into triglycerides.

- **Increased physical activity**: Ramping up your physical activity 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 recommended that adults get about 150 minutes of moderate intensity activity or 75 minutes of vigorous intensity activity each week, along with doing strength activities two days per week. These guidelines are outlined in more detail by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. If you're not active right now or would like to incorporate more into your day, taking small steps such as walking up a few flights of stairs instead of taking the elevator or going on a walk around the block all contribute to your weekly amounts of physical activity.

- **Reduced consumption of alcohol:** To answer your question, Don't mix?, alcohol is full of calories and sugar, which if not used, are turned into triglycerides. This means that high alcohol consumption can increase your triglyceride levels. Studies have also shown that alcohol has varying effects depending on body composition. Specifically, researchers have found that individuals who are obese experience elevated blood triglyceride levels after consuming alcohol. Regardless, health professionals recommend drinking less alcohol or cutting out alcohol entirely to help reduce or manage triglyceride levels. If you're concerned about reducing your alcohol intake, check out How do I drink in moderation? from the Go Ask Alice! Alcohol & Other Drugs archives.

It's always a good idea to talk with your health care provider before making any major changes to your diet or physical activity regimen. If these lifestyle changes aren't effective, they may be able to prescribe certain medications or determine what strategies will be safest and most effective for lowering triglyceride levels.

Alice!

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