

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

March 24, 2019

“Egg Medical Recommendations Get Scrambled Again”

Here we go again. Over the past decade we have been assured that eggs are a great source of nutrition and are safe to eat. That followed decades of being scared to death to even touch an egg, let alone eat one. A new observational study is claiming that consuming eggs increases the risk of heart disease. The report, combining data from six earlier studies, found a 6% increased risk of cardiovascular disease when the average number of eggs consumed per day went up by half an egg. Norrina Allen, an associate professor of preventive medicine at Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine in Chicago said, "The take home message is that individuals who consume higher levels of dietary cholesterol are at increased risk for the development of heart disease and mortality later in life. And in the US diet, eggs are one of the top sources of cholesterol." Allen said, "I'm not advocating people take them completely out of their diets," she said. "I'm just suggesting that people eat them in moderation." It can be hard to translate the association between eggs and heart disease into advice, Allen allowed. That's because we don't all deal with cholesterol in the same way, she said. "The amount of cholesterol you consume isn't linked in a straightforward way with the amount found in your blood," Allen explained. "That depends on a lot of factors including your genes and how you metabolize cholesterol." In short, Allen's results prove nothing and only point out "associations." Actually, the researchers found an association between egg consumption as reported at the start of the study and participants' risk of developing cardiovascular disease. As their egg consumption rose, so did their risk. The association was weakened to the point that it was no longer statistically significant when researchers accounted for total cholesterol consumption. Other experts weren't convinced that the study shows that eggs were causing heart disease. Cholesterol's role in the development of heart disease has been discussed for more than three decades. The particular contribution of cholesterol derived from eggs has also been studied in several studies, with varying and discrepant results. In general, it is felt that while eggs contain quite a bit of cholesterol—about 200 mg, the maximum daily amount recommended in current guidelines—"eggs in moderation are probably acceptable from a nutritional standpoint." Another expert said, "If you're consuming a huge amount of processed meats, it doesn't matter how many eggs you're eating."

In the America that I love, the best regimen for lowering cholesterol is exercise and healthy eating. Eating a healthier diet, losing weight if needed, exercising more, and reducing stress can shave LDL levels by 5%-10%. Eat eggs in moderation.

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