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## Cholesterol and Kids

My good friend and physician Dr. Pam Zelasko sent me an article recently, and when I read the title it took me all of about two seconds to go ballistic: *Test All Kids for Cholesterol by Age 11*. The reason my blood pressure spiked was not so much the recommendations themselves but what the physicians were quoted as saying. Let's take a look at the guidelines as well as the positive and negative implications.

### The Childhood Cholesterol Guidelines

The new guidelines were written by an expert panel appointed by the National Health, Lung, and Blood Institute and endorsed by the American Academy of Pediatrics. The American Heart Association also praised the new guidelines and will host a special meeting about them today at their national conference.

Some of the guidelines make a lot of sense; with one-third of all kids overweight or obese, testing children as young as 9 for type 2 diabetes is a good idea. The earlier you intervene, the more likely lifestyle changes such as weight loss and exercise can be effective, perhaps reducing the need for medication.

The guidelines also recommend that all children be screened for cholesterol levels between the ages of 9 and 11; that age is important because cholesterol has a tendency to decline during growth spurts in the teenage years. They advise testing them again between 17 and 21.

### The Problem

Physician groups, especially those who practice preventive cardiology, think these guidelines are terrific. Why? Because if the testing doesn't occur until the kids are in college, it may be too late because plaque will have formed. How do they know this? From autopsy studies on young men killed in the Korean and Viet Nam wars and from children who were killed in accidents. The autopsies revealed that they had the yellow fatty streaks associated with high cholesterol, and thus were in the initial stages of coronary artery disease. I've read those studies, and those are facts.

Here's what we don't know. We don't know the patterns of those fatty streaks. It's possible that men and women under the stress of war lay down fatty streaks; the streaks may be reabsorbed when they're no longer under fire.

We don't know their cholesterol levels at the time of their deaths. You can have cholesterol of 150, but if you're in a state of inflammation, you're at risk for laying down plaque. That's one of the problems: testing cholesterol alone at early ages doesn't really tell us anything about the future. There are no studies to support cholesterol testing at ages 9 to 11 to show what will happen at 40, 50, or 60 years of age.

Let's go a step further: we don't know the pattern of cholesterol over a single day. Maybe it's higher in the morning and lower later in the day. We don't know the pattern over an entire week, month, or year. By 11, some kids will have entered puberty—what effect do those new hormones have?

We don't have basic information about the simplest blood test we have. How are we supposed to know what's a normal pattern if we don't have basic information? I could rant on this for several more paragraphs, but I think you get the idea.

## The Upside

There are two good reasons why cholesterol testing between 9 and 11 is a good idea. First, it establishes a baseline. I answer questions every day from people who are in their 30s and have never had their cholesterol checked. I think knowing the numbers is important, because while there's no data on cholesterol patterns, you can establish one for yourself and your children. It will tell you a lot about you and them.

The second reason is that it can identify children at risk for heart disease due to genetically high cholesterol. This testing might have identified me as being at risk, because my dad died when he was 41. Early intervention in those instances might prevent complications later in life, but that's going to affect less than 1% of all children tested.

## The Bottom Line

I'm not opposed to this testing—I'm just incensed by their reasoning, because there's no evidence to support it. However, as I said earlier, we need to know the patterns of these health metrics for us and those we love. Blood pressure, total and HDL-cholesterol, C reactive protein, vitamin D, and serum insulin are the important ones in my opinion.

When you know more, hopefully, you'll do more to take control of your health and help your children take control of theirs.

What are you prepared to do today?

**Dr. Chet**

**Reference:** Pediatrics 2011; 128 (Supplement 5):1-48.

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