

ASCVD Podcast – Tackling the Problem Through Lifestyle Modifications

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ASCVD Perspectives portrays the journey of a typical patient through their various care settings after a recent cardiac event and being diagnosed with clinical ASCVD. This podcast is intended to be a guide to educate patients on shared decision-making practices and provide examples of questions they can incorporate into their personal experience. It also serves as a model to help clinicians understand different ways they can empower their patients to become advocates and active leaders in their own disease management.

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The patients used in the series are paid actors, and any recommendations or information are not to be construed as a directive, endorsement, or medical advice. Always check with your provider before starting or changing your medications, diet, or exercise regimen.

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Julia Zumpano, RD: Hello, Claudia. My name is Julia Zumpano. I'm a dietitian, and we are meeting here today to discuss your ASCVD and any effects that your diet and exercise can improve and further prevent future events. So welcome, and I know you've gotten some care in the past in regard to your ASCVD. So, I have reviewed your chart and I'm aware of your history.

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Julia Zumpano, RD: But I want to start off the visit by seeing if you have any specific questions that I can address for you.

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Kattia (patient): OK, well, thank you. OK, the first question is, can I cure this condition by changing my diet and exercising?

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Julia Zumpano, RD: So, you cannot necessarily cure the condition but significantly improve the outcomes by changing your diet and exercise.

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Kattia (patient): OK, if this is a result of high cholesterol, can I just eat foods high in good cholesterol to get rid of the problem?

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Julia Zumpano, RD: So that's a great question. ASCVD is not just a result of high cholesterol. There are many factors that influence it. High cholesterol is one of those factors. And luckily, high cholesterol can be improved by modifying your diet, although there are no foods that are high in good cholesterol. So, we don't necessarily have good cholesterol in food, but we do have good cholesterol in our bodies.

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Julia Zumpano, RD: And that good cholesterol is called HDL, high-density lipoprotein. The bad cholesterol is called LDL, low-density lipoprotein. So, the foods that affect this LDL, the bad cholesterol in your diet are foods that are high in saturated fat, solid fats at room temperature. So things like red meat and processed meats, cheese and eggs, egg yolks specifically, and that's not to say that you can't eat any of these

foods, but just being mindful of how much. Butter, lard, bacon fat, sauces and gravies that are coming from animals are high sources of saturated fat, which then in turn can increase your bad LDL cholesterol.

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Kattia (patient): OK, so what types of food should I be eating and avoiding, to improve my cholesterol?

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Julia Zumpano, RD: That's a great question. Mediterranean diet is the one that's been advised the most, and the reason is because it has been shown to have positive outcomes on cholesterol and reducing the risk of heart disease. So, the Mediterranean diet is abundant in fruits and vegetables; legumes, which are dried beans and lentils; and fish; and extra virgin olive oil. So those are the foods that you certainly want to eat more of.

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Julia Zumpano, RD: They are naturally low in saturated fat and naturally good sources of monounsaturated fatty acids, which are a healthy fat, which has been proven to help improve good levels of cholesterol, or that HDL. And then avoiding the foods that are high in the saturated fat: processed foods, commercial products, packaged desserts, and then sweets of course, are not necessarily favorable from an overall health standpoint, but specifically for heart disease and cholesterol, as well.

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Kattia (patient): So, does this mean I can never have my favorite comfort foods or alcohol, ever again?

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Julia Zumpano, RD: Absolutely not. You certainly can have comfort foods, and you certainly can safely drink alcohol. As for alcohol, I would run it by your cardiologist and see what they suggest is an appropriate amount of alcohol to consume, and what types of alcohol are best to consume. Just due to... there may be some medication interactions with alcohol, so it's always safe to run it by your cardiologist first, but everything can be included in moderation.

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Julia Zumpano, RD: Comfort foods are also allowed to be included, again in moderation. So just being mindful of your intake. How much you're having. If you are able to make some of these comfort foods with less added fats, leaner meats, less added sugars or oils, or unhealthy ingredients, certainly making slight adjustments to the recipes can make them a better choice for you. But even the full-flavored, full fat version can still be eaten on occasion, special occasions and then in moderation. So really cutting back on the portion of them.

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Kattia (patient): OK, that's good to know. Thank you for that. OK, so I live in an area without many grocery stores, and it's really, really hard to just get to the grocery store regularly. How do you suggest I get access to fresh fruits and vegetables?

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Julia Zumpano, RD: So there are a couple of ways that you can access this. If you do have any food pantries available in your area, that's a great place to start. Another way would be, you know we're coming along the season for some markets, so an open air, fresh market. If you have any local places that do sell fresh produce, you can do farmer's markets. That could be another place if you have that available to you. And then lastly, if you have the availability of ordering some food online.

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Julia Zumpano, RD: So, there's a lot of grocery delivery that, again, has exploded over the last year. If you're able to access some meal and food delivery, that would be another great option.

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Kattia (patient): Well, unfortunately, my income does not allow me to invest much money into fresh fruits and vegetables that you've recommended. Are there any other programs that could help me with this?

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Julia Zumpano, RD: Certainly, I would look locally or statewide. So, there's food stamps that you could apply for. There are some local organizations that may be able to help you offset the cost of some of the fruits and vegetables. As I mentioned, the food pantries are another great way to offset the price there. If you are able to purchase them frozen, they tend to be a little less expensive that way. And again, could last a lot longer since you're not able to go to the grocery store very often.

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Julia Zumpano, RD: And another thing would be to really look at your grocery list and see if there is anything on the list that may be unnecessary or you're purchasing that is optional, that you could use that money towards the fruits and vegetables. So, it might be like soda or chips or any bottled water or things that maybe are taking an expense that could be negotiated into buying fruits and vegetables.

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Julia Zumpano, RD: So canned fruits and vegetables are also an option. The only concern with canned foods is that they tend to have added sodium, or salt, and added sugar. So, if you are going to choose canned foods, if you have the ability to choose low sodium canned vegetables, that would be the best. If you don't, just draining and rinsing those vegetables before you cook them, and same with the fruit. If you have the ability to purchase canned fruits that are in their own juice, that would be preferred. If you only can find them in syrup, I would do light syrup. And again, drain and rinse those canned fruits.

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Kattia (patient): OK, all right. Now in regard to exercise, what can I do for exercise if I don't have like a gym membership or don't live in a safe area that allows me to exercise outside?

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Julia Zumpano, RD: There are a lot of great online options that are free. So, there are websites that provide free exercises you can do in your home safely without any equipment. There are walking videos. There's also, if you have a local library, a lot of the times they have DVDs that you could rent that are exercise-guided DVDs that you could do in the comfort of your home. They're walking videos or light resistance videos, yoga.

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Julia Zumpano, RD: So, there's a whole slew of resources available online that are free, as well as locally. Another thing you could do if you have the ability to drive to a location that is safer for you to walk in or go with a partner or a friend, that you could feel more safe when that opportunity would present itself.

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Kattia (patient): OK, now what if I've been consistent with exercise and my bad cholesterol still isn't improving? What do I do?

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Julia Zumpano, RD: So then maybe take a look at just because it's consistent, maybe you're not doing the right type of exercise or maybe not burning enough calories. We recommend one hundred and fifty minutes of exercise per week, as a minimum. So, one hundred and fifty to two hundred fifty has been shown to be effective. So, kind of looking at the timing, frequency, and the intensity. Another thing is that the exercise is not the only culprit. So maybe looking more aggressively at diet, is there something you're overlooking in your diet that could be contributing?

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Julia Zumpano, RD: So Kattia, as a summary for today, I'd like you to assess your surroundings and see if there are any types of exercises that you feel that you could safely start to incorporate regularly in your home. And start with your own pantry and cupboards and take a look at the foods that are there and see which foods kind of fit within the criteria we spoke about, and which foods you might be able to include. And then as for a follow up, I generally recommend a one to three month follow up if that were to be feasible for you.

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Julia Zumpano, RD: One concern is that we want to check your insurance. Make sure that your insurance is able to cover and see what they have to offer in regard to nutrition care and coverage. And hopefully, we can address some of the goals that we have made today at our follow up and continue to work on making positive improvements in your diet and lifestyle towards preventing and managing ASCVD.

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Kattia (patient): Thank you so much. I really, really appreciate all this information. And I'll check with my insurance and hopefully, I'll see you in a couple of months.

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Julia Zumpano, RD: Sounds good.

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Kattia (patient): OK, thank you.

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Julia Zumpano, RD: Thank you.

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