

Get a Handle on Your Cholesterol Levels

1st June 2020

If you're aiming to lower your cholesterol levels, consider your daily habits. Although sometimes linked to genetics, your lifestyle can have an impact on your levels.

Cholesterol basics

Cholesterol is a waxy substance made by the liver, but it can also be found in some foods. Cells need it to function, and your body relies on it to make Vitamin D and some hormones.

There are two types of cholesterol: low-density lipoprotein (LDL) and high-density lipoprotein (HDL). Unlike LDL, HDL is protective and can help prevent heart disease.

If your LDL levels are too high, your doctor may prescribe medication such as statins. But sometimes it's possible to lower your cholesterol by exercising and making changes to your diet.

Diet can have a major impact on your LDL and HDL levels as well as other markers of your health.

Lower your cholesterol through lifestyle changes

Making healthier choices is an effective strategy for improving your cholesterol levels and reducing your need for medication. Even if you don't have high cholesterol, changing some of your habits now can help you keep your numbers in the healthy range.

Diet can have a major impact on your LDL and HDL levels as well as other markers of your health. Start by reading food labels carefully—not just for cholesterol content but for sugar, fiber, and various types of fat, all of which can affect your cholesterol levels.

- Unsaturated fats (mono- and poly-unsaturated) are heart healthy
- Saturated fats will increase overall cholesterol and LDL levels.
- Trans fats lower HDL levels and increase LDL levels.

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Heart-healthy tips for everyday life

Limit saturated fats and avoid trans fats by replacing them with unsaturated fats in your diet.

Reduce your saturated fat intake by choosing low-fat dairy products instead of full fat. Examples are butter, which is high in saturated fat and margarine which tends to contain trans fats. Look for a margarine with 0 grams of trans fats and make sure the ingredients label doesn't list anything "partially hydrogenated" or "hydrogenated." These ingredients signal that the food has trans fats but may not be listed on the nutrition label because it is a small amount per serving.

Choose leaner meats and trim the excess fat or drain it after cooking.

Try having a meatless meal more often. You can benefit from the healthy fat in fish by eating two servings a week. Other protein replacements include soy, nuts, or beans.

Bake, broil, roast, grill or steam foods, instead of frying them.

Eat more whole grains, like oats, brown rice, and popcorn. The fiber in whole grains can help improve cholesterol levels, specifically LDLs. Make sure that the first ingredient on the label of products like whole grain bread and pasta is "whole grain" or "whole wheat."

Choose oils that are higher in unsaturated fats such as canola, safflower, flaxseed, sunflower, and olive oil. Avocados can also be used as a replacement in some recipes. Despite the hype about coconut oil, it does have a lot of saturated fat so using it sparingly is a safer bet.

Eat nuts. Nuts, nut butters, avocado, flaxseeds, and chia seeds all have healthy fats and can be good additions to your diet.

Limit sweets including sugar-sweetened beverages. The sugar increases triglycerides, a type of fat in your blood. Plus, baked goods tend to contain unhealthy fats.

Eat your veggies. Your heart benefits from the fiber and nutrients in fruits and veggies, and

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they also promote a healthy weight.

Reduce or eliminate alcohol. If you drink alcohol, do so in moderation.

Get moving. Regular exercise can increase your HDL levels.

Don't use tobacco. Smoking can decrease HDL levels.