

# How To Lower Your Cholesterol

By Audrey Smart

High cholesterol affects more than 39 million adults in the United States. Another 59 million are at borderline high levels. Doctors advise everyone to get their cholesterol under control since elevated levels increase the risks of heart disease.

According to the American Heart Association, cholesterol is a soft, waxy substance found among the lipids (fats) in the bloodstream. Cholesterol is used to form cell membranes, hormones and other tissues. You may have heard of “good” and “bad” cholesterol. LDL cholesterol is the villain while HDL cholesterol is helpful. Too much built up LDL cholesterol causes damage to artery linings. It can be especially dangerous to diabetics and smokers who already have increased stress on the arterial walls. This buildup and the narrowing of the arteries ultimately may result in a heart attack.

HDL acts as a scavenger in removing cholesterol from the body. When your cholesterol level is measured, your HDL and LDL levels are tested along with triglycerides. Triglycerides are found in food and are produced naturally in our bodies. People with high triglyceride levels usually also have high cholesterol levels.

Two of the simplest ways to lower your cholesterol involve eating healthful foods that increase your HDL and eliminating or reducing your consumption of foods that increase your LDL.

Doctors say that 20 grams a day of LDLs is acceptable for healthy people. Those with high cholesterol levels should try to lower their intake to less than 20 grams. Raising HDL levels through diet alone is difficult, but a combination of exercise and healthy eating seems to work. Exercise also helps lower triglycerides, another fat linked to heart disease. Losing as few as 10 pounds can also lower cholesterol.

One of the healthiest steps you can take is to eat more fiber. Whole grains, legumes, fruits and vegetables all contain fiber. Try to eat at least two servings of fresh fruit and three servings of vegetables and whole grains each day. Oats, legumes and fruits containing pectin (apples, grapes, citrus fruit) help lower cholesterol due to their soluble fiber content. Eat oats or high fiber cereal often for breakfast. Try to eat a dark green or yellow vegetable every day and eat lots of high fiber vegetables such as broccoli, celery, cauliflower and potato skins.

A study in the New England Journal of Medicine reported that eating three or four tablespoons of soy protein a day lowered LDLs by nearly 13 percent and triglycerides by more than 10 percent. You can incorporate more soy into your diet by drinking soymilk, eating tofu, soy burgers, and soybeans and by stirring soy powder into juice.

Monounsaturated fats, found in avocados, nuts, olive and canola oils, lower LDLs when they are substituted for saturated fats. Even better news is that they don't bring down HDL levels.

Seafood is a good choice at least twice a week. Certain fish (mackerel, tuna and salmon) contain high concentrations of omega fatty acids, which help lower cholesterol. Eat the fish baked or broiled and steer clear of fried fish and butter. Flaxseeds are also high in omega-three fatty acids. Flaxseed can be added to cereal, yogurt or muffins, making it easy to incorporate more in your diet.

Reduce the amount of fat in your diet. That means avoiding cakes, cookies, pies, chips and doughnuts. Buy reduced fat cheeses, skim milk, low-fat sour cream, low-fat cream cheese and low-fat crackers. Don't go overboard with low-fat cookies, cakes and other confections. Even though they may have reduced fat, they are still loaded with sugar and calories.

Lowering your fat intake can reduce your weight as well as your cholesterol level. Limit your portions of red meat. A portion should be no larger than a deck of cards. Also limit your consumption of trans fatty acids. They are primarily found in margarine, vegetable shortening, commercial baked goods, crackers and other snack foods.

Eat only lean meats; avoid skin, organ meats, processed lunchmeats, hot dogs and fast food burgers. Stay away from fried foods and eat meats that are baked or broiled. Instead of tuna packed in oil, choose tuna packed in water.

If you are unsuccessful in lowering your LDL levels through diet and exercise, your doctor may suggest a prescription to help get your cholesterol down to a healthy level.