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Cholesterol Information & Diet Advice

A Practical Guide

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Some Important Information On Cholesterol

Cholesterol itself isn't bad. In fact, cholesterol is just one of the many substances created and used by our bodies to keep us healthy. It is a fatty substance known as lipid. Some of the cholesterol we need is produced naturally mainly by the liver (and can be affected by your family health history), while some of it comes from the food we eat. Cholesterol is only found in animal products.

A cholesterol screening measures your level of HDL and LDL. HDL is the "good" cholesterol which helps keep the LDL (bad) cholesterol from getting lodged into your artery walls. A healthy level of HDL may also protect against heart attack and stroke, while low levels of HDL (less than 40 mg/dL for men and less than 50 mg/dL for women) have been shown to increase the risk of heart disease.

When should I test my cholesterol levels?

Your GP may recommend that you have your blood cholesterol levels tested if you:

- have been diagnosed with coronary heart disease, stroke or mini-stroke (TIA) or peripheral arterial disease (PAD)
- are over 40
- have a family history of early cardiovascular disease
- have a close family member with a cholesterol-related condition
- are overweight
- have high blood pressure, diabetes or a health condition that can increase cholesterol levels, such as an underactive thyroid

What causes high cholesterol?

- Nutrition – although some foods contain cholesterol, such as eggs, kidneys and some seafood, dietary cholesterol does not have much of an impact in human blood cholesterol levels. However, saturated fats do! Foods high in saturated fats include red meat, some pies, sausages, hard cheese, lard, pastry, cakes, most biscuits, and cream (there are many more).
- Sedentary lifestyle – people who do not exercise and spend most of their time sitting/lying down have significantly higher levels of LDL (bad cholesterol) and lower levels of HDL (good cholesterol).
- Bodyweight – people who are overweight/obese are much more likely to have higher LDL levels and lower HDL levels, compared to people who are of normal weight.
- Smoking – this can have quite a considerable effect on LDL levels.
- Alcohol – people who consume too much alcohol regularly, generally have much higher levels of LDL and much lower levels of HDL, compared to people who abstain or those who drink in moderation.

How to increase the levels of good Cholesterol (HDL)

- Regular physical activity can help your body produce more HDLs.
- Reducing TRANS fat and eating a balanced and nutritious diet is another way to increase your HDL.
- If these measures are not enough to increase your HDL to goal, your healthcare practitioner may prescribe a medication specifically to increase your HDLs

How to keep levels of bad cholesterol (LDL) to acceptable levels

- LDL cholesterol is produced naturally by the body, but many people inherit genes from their mother, father or even grandparents that cause them to make too much. You can control the levels of LDL in the blood by reducing the intake of saturated fat, TRANS fats and dietary cholesterol. If high blood cholesterol runs in your family, lifestyle modifications may not be enough to help lower your LDL blood cholesterol. Everyone is different, so it is important to find a treatment plan that's best for you.



Why is it important to keep control of cholesterol levels in the body?

High cholesterol is one of the major controllable risk factors for coronary heart disease, heart attack and stroke. As your blood cholesterol rises, so does your risk of coronary heart disease. If you have other risk factors (such as high blood pressure or diabetes) as well as high cholesterol, this risk increases even more. The more risk factors you have, the greater your chance of developing coronary heart disease. Also, the greater the level of each risk factor, the more that factor affects your overall risk. Your cholesterol level can be affected by your age, gender, family health history and diet.

Why is it important to keep control of cholesterol levels in the body?

High cholesterol levels can cause:

- Atherosclerosis – narrowing of the arteries.
- Higher coronary heart disease risk – an abnormality of the arteries that supply blood and oxygen to the heart. Your risk of coronary heart disease (when your heart's blood supply is blocked or disrupted) also rises as your blood's cholesterol level increases and this can cause angina during physical activity.
- Heart attack – occurs when the supply of blood and oxygen to an area of heart muscle is blocked, usually by a clot in a coronary artery. This causes your heart muscle to die.
- Angina – chest pain or discomfort that occurs when your heart muscle does not get enough blood.
- Other cardiovascular conditions – diseases of the heart and blood vessels.
- Stroke and mini-stroke – occurs when a blood clot blocks an artery or vein, interrupting the flow to an area of the brain. Can also occur when a blood vessel breaks. Brain cells begin to die. This is because cholesterol can build up in the artery wall, restricting the flow of blood to your heart, brain and the rest of your body. It also increases the chance of a blood clot developing somewhere.



Recommendations For Achieving Healthy Cholesterol Levels



A good way to reduce Cholesterol levels is to consume more fiber in your diet and to lose weight. Therefore a well-balanced diet is crucial to maintain a healthy heart. Below is a high fiber, low fat menu suggestion to give you ideas on how best to support heart health through your diet:

Breakfast (07.00–09.00): Porridge made with water or skimmed milk. 80g mixed berries, 1 square of dark chocolate and a handful of mixed seeds (flaxseeds, chia seeds, pumpkin seeds etc) on top.

Lunch (11.00–14.00): Whole smoked mackerel fillet on wholegrain toast. Add a poached egg on top, and roasted tomatoes on the side.

Snack (15.00–16.00): Carrot, cucumber & bell pepper with 2 tbsp hummus.

Dinner (18.00–21.00): Baked potato with red lentil chilli (made with red peppers, garlic, tomatoes, lentils, black beans and spices). Served with fresh guacamole (made with 1/2 avocado, lime juice, red onion and coriander).

I hope this information helps you towards a change in your dietary habits. It is easier than you think to lead a healthy happy lifestyle.

With best wishes,

Dr Milton Maltz MD, M.Phil