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## Cholesterol: Lifestyle Changes to Improve Your Levels

### What is cholesterol?

Cholesterol is a waxy substance your body uses to protect nerves, make cell tissues and produce certain hormones. Some cholesterol is essential for health. Your liver makes all the cholesterol your body needs. How much and what types of cholesterol your liver makes depends on 2 factors: what types of fats you eat and your inherited genetic tendencies. Your body may get cholesterol directly from the food you eat (such as eggs, meats and dairy products). [Too much cholesterol](#) in your blood can raise your risk of having a heart attack or stroke.

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### What is the difference between “good” cholesterol and “bad” cholesterol?

Low-density lipoprotein (LDL) is often called “bad” cholesterol. It delivers cholesterol to the body. High-density lipoprotein (HDL) is often called “good” cholesterol. It removes cholesterol from the bloodstream.

This explains why too much LDL cholesterol is bad for the body, and why a high level of HDL cholesterol is good. For example, if your total cholesterol level is high because of a high LDL level, you may be at higher risk of heart disease or stroke. But, if your total cholesterol level is high only because of a high HDL level, you're probably not at higher risk.

Triglycerides are another type of fat in your blood. When you eat more calories than your body can use, it turns the extra calories into triglycerides. When you change your lifestyle to improve your cholesterol levels, you want to lower LDL, raise HDL and lower triglycerides.

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### What should my cholesterol levels be?

#### Total cholesterol level

- Less than 200 is best.
- 200 to 239 is borderline high.
- 240 or more means you're at increased risk for heart disease.

#### LDL cholesterol levels

- Below 100 is ideal for people who have a higher risk of heart disease.
- 100 to 129 is near optimal.
- 130 to 159 is borderline high.

- 160 or more means you're at a higher risk for heart disease.

#### HDL cholesterol levels

- Less than 40 means you're at higher risk for heart disease.
- 60 or higher greatly reduces your risk of heart disease.

#### Triglycerides

- Less than 150 mg/dL is best

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## What lifestyle changes can I make to help improve my cholesterol levels?

### **Exercise regularly.**

[Exercise](#) can raise HDL cholesterol levels and reduce levels of LDL cholesterol and triglycerides. If you haven't been exercising, try to work up to 30 minutes, 4 to 6 times a week. Make sure you talk to your doctor before starting an exercise plan.

### **Lose weight if you are overweight.**

Being overweight can raise your cholesterol levels. [Losing weight](#), even just 5 or 10 pounds, can lower your total cholesterol, LDL cholesterol and triglyceride levels.

### **If you smoke, quit.**

Smoking lowers your HDL cholesterol. Even exposure to second-hand smoke can affect your HDL level. Talk to your doctor about developing a plan to help you [stop smoking](#).

### **Eat a heart-healthy diet.**

- **Eat plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables.** Fruits and vegetables are naturally low in fat. Not only do they add flavor and variety to your diet, but they are also the best source of fiber, vitamins and minerals for your body. Aim for 5 cups of fruits and vegetables every day, not counting potatoes, corn and rice. Potatoes, corn and rice count as carbohydrates.
- **Pick “good” fats over “bad” fats.** Fat is part of a healthy diet, but you need to [know the difference](#) between “bad” fats and “good” fats. “Bad” fats, such as saturated and trans fats, are found in foods such as butter; coconut and palm oil; saturated or partially hydrogenated vegetable fats such as shortening and margarine; animal fats in meats; and fats in whole milk dairy products. Limit the amount of saturated fat in your diet, and avoid [trans fat](#) completely. Unsaturated fat is the “good” fat. Most fats in fish, vegetables, grains and tree nuts are unsaturated. Try to eat unsaturated fat in place of saturated fat. For example, you can use olive oil or canola oil in cooking instead of butter.
- **Use healthier cooking methods.** Baking, broiling and roasting are the healthiest ways to prepare meat, poultry and other foods. Trim any outside fat or skin before cooking. Lean cuts can be pan-broiled or stir-fried. Use either a nonstick pan or nonstick cooking spray instead of adding fats such as butter or margarine. When eating out, ask how food is prepared. You can request that your food be baked, broiled or roasted, rather than fried.
- **Look for other sources of protein.** Fish, dry beans, tree nuts, peas and lentils offer protein, nutrients and fiber without the cholesterol and saturated fats that meats have. Consider eating one “meatless” meal each week. Try substituting beans for meat in a favorite recipe, such as lasagna or chili. Snack on a handful of almonds or pecans. Soy is also an excellent source of protein. Good examples of soy include soy milk, edamame (green soy beans), tofu and soy protein shakes.
- **Get more fiber in your diet.** Add good sources of fiber to your meals. Examples include

fruits, vegetables, whole grains (such as oat bran, whole and rolled oats and barley), legumes (such as beans and peas) and nuts and seeds (such as ground flax seed). In addition to fiber, whole grains supply B-vitamins and important nutrients not found in foods made with white flour.

- **Eat more fish.** Fish are an excellent source of omega-3 fatty acids. Wild-caught oily fish, such as salmon, tuna, mackerel and sardines, are the best sources of omega-3s, but all fish contain some amount of this beneficial fatty acid. Aim for 2 6-oz servings each week.
- **Limit how much cholesterol you get in your diet.** You should limit your overall cholesterol intake to less than 300 milligrams per day, or less than 200 milligrams if you have heart disease.

#### **Add supplements to your diet.**

Certain [supplements](#) may help improve your cholesterol levels if changing your diet isn't enough. Some examples include:

- **Plant sterols and stanols.** Plant sterols and stanols can help keep your body from absorbing cholesterol. Sterols have been added to some foods, including margarines and spreads, orange juice and yogurt. You can also find sterols and stanols in some dietary supplements.
- **Omega-3 fatty acids.** If you have heart disease or high triglycerides, consider taking an omega-3 or fish oil supplement. Make sure the supplement has at least 1,000 mg of EPA and DHA (these are the specific omega-3 fatty acids found in fish).
- **Red yeast rice.** A common seasoning in Asian countries, red yeast rice may help reduce the amount of cholesterol your body makes. It is available as a dietary supplement. Talk to your doctor before taking red yeast rice, especially if you take another cholesterol-lowering medicine called a statin. The recommended dose of red yeast rice is 1,200 milligrams twice a day.

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