

Lifestyle Changes to Improve Cholesterol

High cholesterol increases your risk of heart disease and heart attacks. There are medications to help reduce cholesterol, however, with and without these medications it is important to make lifestyle changes to reduce your cholesterol in a natural way.

Choose healthier fats Saturated fats increase your total and low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol, or “bad” cholesterol. These are found primarily in red meat and dairy products. You should aim to get less than 7% of your daily calories from saturated fats. Choose leaner meats, low-fat dairy and monounsaturated fats (found in olive and canola oils) for healthier options.

Eliminate trans fats Trans fats raise “bad” cholesterol and lower “good” cholesterol - a combination which increases the risk of heart attacks. Trans fats can be found in fried food and many commercial products such as cookies, cakes, and crackers. In the United States, if a food contains less than 0.5 grams of trans fat per serving it can be labeled as “trans fat free”. Even small amounts of trans fats can add up. Read the ingredients list and avoid foods with partially hydrogenated oils.

Eat foods rich in omega-3 fatty acids Omega-3 fatty acids have heart benefits. They help to increase high-density lipoprotein (HDL), or “good” cholesterol. They also reduce triglycerides (a type of fat in the blood) and reduce blood pressure. Some types of fish, such as salmon, mackerel and herring, are high in omega-3 fatty acids. Other sources include walnuts, almonds, and ground flaxseeds.

Increase soluble fiber There are two types of fiber, soluble and insoluble. Both have heart-health benefits, but soluble fiber also helps lower your LDL levels. Soluble fiber is in oats, oat bran, fruits, beans, lentils, and vegetables.

Add whey protein Whey protein is one of two proteins in dairy products - the other is casein. Studies have shown that whey protein when taken as a supplement lowers both LDL and total cholesterol. You can find whey protein powders in health food stores and some grocery stores.

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Being overweight can contribute to high cholesterol. Losing as little as 5-10% of your weight can improve cholesterol levels. Evaluate your daily routine and consider what changes you can make. Even small changes can add up. Instead of getting fast food, pack a healthy lunch; instead of eating when you are frustrated, go for a brisk walk; instead of having soda, consider water or seltzer.

Exercise can also improve cholesterol. Moderate exercise can raise HDL (good) cholesterol. With your doctor's approval, exercise 30 minutes per day. Adding physical activity, even in small intervals several times per day, can help you to begin to lose weight. Even taking the stairs or doing some sit-ups while watching commercials can make a difference.

Be sure that the changes you make are something you can keep up with long term. Consider taking a brisk walk during your lunch hour, swimming laps, playing a sport, or joining an exercise class. To stay motivated, join an exercise group or have a friend join you.

If you smoke, stop. Quitting can not only improve your HDL cholesterol, but within one year your risk of heart disease is half that of a smoker. Within 15 years, your risk of heart disease is similar to those who have never smoked.

Sometimes lifestyle changes aren't enough to lower cholesterol levels. Don't be discouraged if your doctor recommends taking medication. Take it as prescribed and continue your lifestyle changes. Lifestyle changes may help you keep your medication dose low.

Questions about your cholesterol?

Talk with a VNA Community Healthcare & Hospice nurse at one of our free screenings or call our Wellness Center at 203.458.4284 or email KEagle@vna-commh.org



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