

C NEW-LIFESTYLES STEPS TO A HEALTHIER YOUSM CHOLESTEROL FACTS

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In recent years there has been lots of talk about cholesterol. Food products advertised on television market their cholesterol-reducing qualities or cholesterol-free content. Other commercials urge watchers to ask their doctor about a certain drug manufactured to reduce blood cholesterol. The nightly news reports groundbreaking, less-invasive medical procedures to unblock arteries previous clogged by cholesterol, now routine in hospitals across the country. The nation seems to be abuzz about cholesterol—good cholesterol versus bad cholesterol, total cholesterol and medicines to reduce cholesterol. What is it all about?

What is cholesterol?

Cholesterol is a fat-like substance found in the cells that travels through the bloodstream in packages called lipoproteins. Lipoproteins are essentially small bundles consisting of fat on the inside and covered by proteins on the outside. Since blood is a watery substance and cholesterol is fatty, the two (like oil and water) do not mix. The lipoproteins are carried through the arteries via the bloodstream like inflatable rafts floating down a river.

Making its own sufficient supply of cholesterol, the body needs and uses some cholesterol in order to function properly. The body uses cholesterol to make hormones, Vitamin D and digestive enzymes. In order to do these things, the body needs healthy levels of two kinds of lipoproteins to carry cholesterol throughout the body—LDL (low density lipoprotein) and HDL (high density lipoprotein).



terol. It earns its bad reputation by causing a buildup of cholesterol in the arteries and, as a result, increasing the chance of heart disease. As its name indicates, LDL particles tend to be small—so instead of flowing through the arteries with the blood, they want to cling to the walls of the arteries. The higher the LDL level in the blood, the more likely LDL particles are to build up in the arteries, leading to blockages of the blood flow to the heart and other serious problems.

Specialized cholesterol screening tests can now determine not only the level of LDL and HDL in the blood, but they can also tell the size of the LDL and HDL particles. This is important because a person may have a higher-than-desired level of LDL, but the LDL particles may be of larger size, which would flow through the bloodstream more easily and thus decrease the chance of blockage.

HDL (high density lipoprotein) cholesterol is known conversely as "good" cholesterol. Its role is a positive one—it carries cholesterol from other parts of the body back to the liver which then removes the cholesterol from the body. A high HDL level will also lower the risk of heart disease.

What is high blood cholesterol?

High blood cholesterol is a serious condition because of its role in increasing the risk of heart disease. Too much cholesterol in the blood can cause the arteries to narrow as the cholesterol builds up as plaque on the arterial walls. The buildup of plaque causes a condition called atherosclerosis or hardening of the arteries.

If the coronary arteries narrow and harden (due to the plaque build up), the blood flow essential in bringing oxygenated blood to the heart is compromised causing coronary artery disease and resulting chest pain called angina. Plaque buildup can also cause blood clots in the arteries which also block the flow of blood, resulting in heart attack.

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LDL (low density lipoprotein) cholesterol is also known as "bad" cholesterol.

Lowering cholesterol starts with making healthy lifestyle changes.

What causes high blood cholesterol?

High blood cholesterol can be the result of a variety of both controllable and uncontrollable factors. Controllable factors which elevate blood cholesterol include: certain foods found to raise cholesterol levels (foods high in saturated fat, trans fatty acids and foods from animal sources), being overweight and living a sedentary lifestyle (not getting enough exercise or physical activity).

Uncontrollable factors include heredity, age and gender. High cholesterol can run in families as a genetic trait passed on from generation to generation.

Generally, men, once they reach puberty, have lower levels of HDL than women. As women and men age, their LDL cholesterol levels naturally rise. After age 55, women typically have higher LDL levels than men.

How do I know if I have high blood cholesterol?

Cholesterol levels can only be measured by taking a blood test. It is best to not eat or drink anything 9 to 12 hours before having the test in order to have an accurate fasting blood cholesterol reading. The cholesterol test will measure the amount of LDL "bad" cholesterol, HDL "good" cholesterol, total cholesterol and triglycerides in the blood.

Cholesterol levels are measured in milligrams (mg) of cholesterol per deciliter (dL) of blood. For total cholesterol, a level of less than 200 mg/dL is considered desirable. The results of a blood cholesterol test should be gone over with a health professional, as it is important for the patient to be informed of what these numbers mean.

How can I lower my cholesterol?

Taking the necessary steps to lowering blood cholesterol is extremely important in order to decrease the risk of heart disease. Lowering blood cholesterol starts with making healthy lifestyle changes—maintaining a healthy weight, eating a low-fat/high-fiber diet and getting regular physical activity.

Eating a healthy diet

Eating the right foods can help to lower cholesterol.

First, limit foods that are high in saturated fats, trans fats and cholesterol. Choose non-fat or low-fat dairy products over full-fat ones. Use healthy oils like canola or olive oil instead of butter, shortening or margarine. Add soluble fiber by eating whole grain breads, cereals, pastas and brown rice.

Eat a variety of fruits and vegetables

for fiber and important vitamins and nutrients. Cut down on red meat and choose lean sources of protein like fish, turkey, and chicken.

Physical Activity

Regular physical activity helps to raise HDL "good" cholesterol and lower LDL "bad" cholesterol. To maintain a healthy weight, the CDC recommends that adults engage in moderate-intensity physical activities for at least 30 minutes on 5 or more days of the week. Children and adolescents can choose any type of moderate or higher intensity physical activity, such as brisk walking, playing tag, jumping rope, or swimming, as long as it adds up to at least one hour a day.

Medication

There are a number of medications that help to lower blood cholesterol. If necessary, these medicines must be prescribed by a physician.

Why are so many people talking about omega-3 fatty acids and soy protein products? Do they help to reduce cholesterol?

Recently, the FDA has approved qualified health claims for both soy protein products and foods containing omega-3 fatty acids, allowing such products to market their heart-healthy benefits. Ongoing research is being conducted to examine exactly how omega-3 fatty acids and soy protein impact our health, as they may prove to provide a range of benefits from improved heart health to protection against some types of cancers.

Currently, some experts say there is a positive link between daily consumption of 25 grams of soy protein (or isoflavones from soy products) and lower blood cholesterol in individuals with high blood cholesterol. Soy proteins are found in tofu, soybeans and soymilk.

Omega-3 fatty acids are a form of polyunsaturated fat found in fatty, cold water fish like salmon, tuna, herring, mackerel, sardines and swordfish. Walnuts and flaxseed oil are also good sources of omega-3 fatty acids. Current research has found that omega-3 reduces the risk of heart disease and contributes to lower blood cholesterol and blood pressure as evidenced in Eskimo and Japanese populations—both of which consume traditional diets rich in omega-3 fatty acids from cold water fish.

Experts recommend eating 1-2 servings of fish each week for good health. Omega-3 can also be consumed as a fish oil supplement that is packaged in a capsule and available at health food and drug stores. Remember to always ask for a physician's professional opinion before taking dietary supplements.



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