

# What You Should Know About Cholesterol and Heart Health

**W**hat is cholesterol? Cholesterol is a waxy substance found in the human body that is necessary for all cells to function. However, several types of cholesterol, as well as too much cholesterol in the blood, can lead to heart disease.

- Low density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol (known as “bad cholesterol”) is responsible for the build up of cholesterol in blood vessels. The higher the LDL level, the greater the risk for heart disease.
- High-density lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol (known as “good cholesterol”) removes cholesterol from the blood and blood vessels. The higher the HDL level, the lower the risk for heart disease.
- Triglycerides, a form of fat, are also related to heart disease. The higher the level of triglycerides in the blood, the greater the risk for heart disease.

## Desirable Cholesterol Levels\*

- Total cholesterol - less than 200 mg/dL
  - HDL cholesterol - more than 40 mg/dL
  - LDL cholesterol - less than 100 mg/dL
  - Triglycerides - less than 150 mg/dL.
- Every time you have a cholesterol test, make sure you ask the doctor for the results.

## What Helps Decrease the Chances for Heart Disease?

Changes in diet and lifestyle can help improve heart health. The most important things to work on are eating right, exercising, controlling weight, and not smoking.

## What Should I Eat?

- Eating foods high in fiber can help lower cholesterol. Fiber is found only in plant foods—

\*For patients at low risk for heart disease.

- mainly fruits, vegetables, whole grain products, and dried beans (legumes).
- Eat several servings of fruits and vegetables every day. A good rule of thumb is to eat a fruit and/or a vegetable at each meal.
- Include whole grain foods such as cereals, whole wheat bread, oatmeal, brown rice, and barley.
- Eat dried beans and peas regularly, such as lentils, split peas, red beans, pinto beans, lima beans, black-eyed peas, garbanzo beans, and navy beans.
- Eat fish and seafood at least a few times each week.
- Choose poultry (chicken and turkey) instead of red meat; eat white meat more often than dark meat and avoid eating the skin.
- Eat smaller portions overall of meat, poultry, fish, and cheese. Fill up your plate with more vegetables.
- If using margarine, avoid “stick” margarines, which contain trans fats.
- Choose low-fat or fat-free milk products. Examples include skim or 1% milk, low-fat cottage cheese, buttermilk, low-fat or fat-free yogurt.

*A good rule of thumb is to eat a fruit and/or a vegetable at each meal.*

## What Should I Limit?

Limiting foods does not mean never eating them. Instead, try to create meals based on the healthy



foods previously listed, and eat the following foods sparingly:

- High-fat meats—ribs, corned beef, canned meats, untrimmed cuts
- Egg yolks
- Organ meats (liver, kidneys)
- Cheese
- Processed meats—cold cuts, sausage, hot dogs, bacon, bologna, salami
- Fried foods—french fries, onion rings, potato chips, corn chips, fried chicken
- Butter, margarine, mayonnaise, cream, cream cheese, vegetable shortening, meat drippings, lard
- Coconut and palm oils (and non-dairy creamers containing them), half-and-half, sour cream; choose reduced-fat alternatives if possible
- High-fat desserts and baked products—ice cream, pie, cake, cookies, doughnuts, croissants, biscuits.

### Shopping and Cooking Tips

- Read food labels and pay attention to total fat, saturated fat, and trans fat. Choose products with the smallest amounts.
- When eating meat, choose lean cuts and trim-off all visible fat.
- Leaner cuts of beef are round, flank, sirloin, and lean (90%) ground meat.
- Leaner cuts of pork are center loin, chop, and tenderloin.
- Cook dishes that include beans. Some examples are lentil, navy bean, split pea, or minestrone soups; baked beans; hummus; refried beans; and chili.
- Use non-stick pans or sprays for cooking.
- Choose healthier cooking methods: bake, roast, broil, steam, grill, or microwave foods instead of frying.
- Use vegetable oils for cooking. Choose from olive, canola, safflower, sesame, sunflower, or corn oil. Avoid cooking with lard, bacon grease, or shortening.

### Resources

- National Heart Lung and Blood Institute  
<http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov>
- American Heart Association  
<http://www.americanheart.org>  
(1-800-AHA-USA-1)
- American Lung Association  
<http://www.lungusa.org>  
(1-800-LUNG-USA)

- Chill and skim fat from soups, stews, and vegetable dishes.
- Season foods with alternatives to butter or margarine. Examples include lemon juice, vinegar, garlic, low-sodium broth or stock, onion, mustard, ketchup, premixed seasonings, or herbs.

### Dining Out

- Choose foods that are baked, broiled, grilled, or roasted instead of fried.
- Eat fewer salads made with mayonnaise or sour cream.
- Limit high-fat toppings such as butter, margarine, cream, gravy, mayonnaise, cheese, and salad dressing.
- Order smaller portion sizes or share dishes.

### Physical Activity

Regular physical activity of any kind helps prevent heart disease. Exercise can help lower LDL cholesterol and increase HDL cholesterol levels.

- Try to be active for 30 minutes every day. To get started, try walking, walking the dog, taking the stairs instead of the elevator, gardening, mowing the lawn, dancing, or doing simple exercises at home.
- Other good ways to exercise are bicycling, skating, tennis, swimming, water aerobics, and yoga.

### Weight Control

If you are overweight, losing weight can help lower LDL cholesterol levels and reduce the risk for heart disease.

- Using the guidelines above for eating and exercise will often be enough for moderate weight loss.
- Losing just a few pounds can make a difference in overall health.
- Set small, specific goals and stick with them.

### Smoking Cessation

Smoking is a major risk factor for heart disease, and it is never too late to stop. A number of medications and other aids are available to help. Many communities also have smoking cessation groups sponsored by local hospitals, the American Heart Association, or the American Lung Association (see Resources box). Talk to your doctor or health care provider for more information.

---

*This Patient Handout was prepared by Lynn Danford, MS, CDE, LD, using materials from the National Heart Lung and Blood Institute and the American Heart Association.*