

How to reduce your cholesterol level

Coronary Heart Disease (CHD) is the biggest cause of death in the UK with around one in five men and one in six women dying from the disease each year.¹ High cholesterol is linked to heart disease and research estimates that over 60% of all deaths from CHD are due to raised cholesterol levels.² So how do we help manage our cholesterol and reduce our risk of developing CHD?

What is cholesterol?

Cholesterol is a waxy, fat-like substance that is essential for the body in small amounts. It plays a vital role in how every cell works and is also the material which the body uses to make other vital chemicals including hormones.

It is made in the body by the liver and is also obtained from diet. Dietary cholesterol is found in foods such as eggs, liver and kidneys, and seafood such as prawns. In the past, it was thought that people should limit these foods to maintain healthy cholesterol levels, but it is now known that saturated fat intake is much more influential in raising blood cholesterol.



Know your cholesterol level

Being aware of your cholesterol level is the first step to improving and maintaining a healthy heart and yet research reveals that eight out of ten people in the UK don't know their cholesterol levels, in comparison to the USA where the majority of adults 'know their number'.³

Measuring your blood cholesterol level involves a simple blood test, so if you have a history of heart disease in the family or are concerned that you have high cholesterol, speak with your doctor/GP who will be able to advise you.

The good and the bad

Cholesterol is transported around the bloodstream in 'vehicles' called lipoproteins.⁴

There are two main types of lipoproteins:

- LDL (low density lipoproteins) which is often called 'bad' cholesterol, carries cholesterol from the liver to the cells. If too much LDL cholesterol circulates in the blood, it can slowly build up in the walls of the arteries, making them narrower and increasing the risk of a heart attack or stroke.
- HDL (high-density lipoproteins) or so-called 'good' cholesterol does the opposite. It retrieves excess cholesterol from body tissues back to the liver.

The ratio of HDL to LDL is important and you should aim to have a low level of LDL and a high level of HDL.

Factors than can lead to high cholesterol:

A diet high in saturated fat - Saturated fats are found in animal products such as dairy, meats and also in cakes, biscuits and pies. Most of us currently eat too much saturated fat.⁵

Sedentary lifestyle - Lack of exercise may increase 'bad' LDL cholesterol and decrease 'good' HDL cholesterol. Physical activity can also help control weight, diabetes and high blood pressure.⁶

A family history of high cholesterol - High cholesterol can be inherited. One in every 500 people also has a gene which means that they have abnormally high levels of cholesterol.²

Proven to actively reduce cholesterol



Overweight - If you have too much fat, especially in your waist area you are at higher risk for health problems, including high blood cholesterol. However you cannot see if you have raised cholesterol and it can affect both those that are normal and overweight.

Age - Cholesterol generally rises slightly with increasing age.

Females - Women tend to associate high cholesterol as a man's illness. Yet in the UK, 31% of women aged 16-24 have blood cholesterol concentrations that exceed 5.0mmol/l, rising to 84% in those aged 55-64.¹

Smoking - Smoking lowers HDL cholesterol levels and increases the tendency for blood to clot.⁴

Excess alcohol consumption - Moderate use of alcohol is linked with higher HDL 'good' cholesterol levels. However, increased consumption of alcohol brings other health dangers, such as alcoholism, high blood pressure, obesity, stroke and cancer.

What should your cholesterol level be?

A desirable level of total cholesterol is 5.0mmol/l and LDL cholesterol less than 3.0mmol/l. However, if you have been told that you are at a higher risk of heart disease i.e. those with high blood pressure or diabetes, recent guidelines suggest a total cholesterol of less than 4.0mmol/l and LDL less than 2.0mmol/l.⁷

Two out of three (66%) adults in the UK have a total cholesterol level above the recommended level of 5.0mmol/l.⁸ For most people, unhealthy levels of cholesterol can be avoided simply by maintaining a healthy diet and lifestyle.

Read our top tips to how a few changes to your daily habits could help protect you from this hidden condition:

1. Try to keep your consumption of saturated fats to a minimum. Check food labels to work out if a food is high or low in fat:
 - Saturated fat - High in saturates is 5g or more per 100g of food.
 - Low is foods with less than 1g saturates per 100g of food.
2. Aim to replace saturated fats, with moderate amounts of 'good' fats also known as monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats.
3. People with a healthy heart tend to eat more wholegrain foods. Try to cut down on the amount of fatty foods you eat by filling up with starchy foods such as bread, pasta or rice instead.
4. Grill, steam, boil and bake foods instead of frying and roasting.
5. Try to eat plenty of fibre-rich foods. Some forms of soluble fibre, such as pectin in fruit and beta glucan in oats, may slightly reduce blood cholesterol.
6. Replace your usual snacks of crisps and biscuits with healthy alternatives such as fruit, nuts and seeds, olives etc.
7. Eat at least two portions of fish per week, one of which should be oily (Choose from salmon, mackerel, sardines, pilchards or herring).
8. Include foods with health promoting benefits over and above the usual nutritional value you might expect. For example: Foods enriched with plant stanols/sterols, which are clinically proven to lower 'bad' LDL cholesterol as part of a healthy diet and lifestyle.
9. Keep physically active. The Department of Health recommends at least 30 minutes of moderate intensity exercise on five or more days of the week.
10. Avoid smoking.
11. Try and manage your stress levels.

1. Steven Allender, Viv Peto, Peter Scarborough, Anna Boxer and Mike Rayner (2007). Coronary heart disease statistics. BHF: London

2. The World Health Report 2002. Reducing risks, promoting healthy life. World Health Organisation 2002. Geneva.

3. Heart UK. The Cholesterol Charity database.

4. Reducing your blood cholesterol fact sheet -The British Heart Foundation

5. Henderson L, Gregorgy J, Irving K et al (2003). The National Diet and Nutrition Survey: Adults aged 19-64 years, volume 2: Energy, protein, carbohydrate, fat and alcohol intake. HMSO, London.

6. Physical activity and the incidence of coronary heart disease'. KE Powell et al. Annual review of public health, 1987.

7. Joint British Medical Societies Recommendations on prevention of coronary heart disease in practice: summary. British Medical Journal 2000 Vol. 320: 705-708.

8. Healthy Survey for England, 2003

This is part 6 of a series of 10 on your 10 steps to health.

This series on a healthy lifestyle has been brought to you by the Benecol® Nutrition Team.

Please discuss any changes to your diet, lifestyle or medication with your healthcare professional.

For more fact sheets and dietary advice contact the careline on **0800 0184010** (UK) or **1800 551707** (IRL)

Proven to actively reduce cholesterol

