A Lifestyle Medicine Approach to Managing Cholesterol



There are two types of cholesterol; HDL (high-density lipoprotein), which is the “good” cholesterol as it helps remove the other forms of cholesterol, LDL (low-density lipoprotein) from your blood stream. High HDL is more common in later life, though isn’t exclusive to that age group. It’s a leading cause of cardiovascular disease, which can increase the risk of stroke or heart attack. Medications can be prescribed to lower and manage cholesterol, but there are lifestyle changes you can make, too.

Eating well = living well

Eating a heart-healthy diet that emphasises fibre-rich foods (like oats, beans, fruits, and vegetables), healthy fats (such as those in avocados, nuts, and olive oil), and lean proteins can directly lower LDL cholesterol and improve HDL cholesterol. Reducing intake of saturated fats and trans fats is especially important, as these raise cholesterol levels and cardiovascular risk.[1]



Eating well doesn’t need to be expensive; frozen fruit and vegetables can be just as beneficial as fresh when it comes to nutritious values.[2]

Sleep Matters

Getting good, quality sleep (around 7–9 hours a night) can help keep your cholesterol at healthy levels.[3] Poor sleep can make it harder for your body to balance cholesterol and can lead to weight gain, which in turn can lead to high cholesterol.[4]

Get Active



Exercise is a great way of increasing HDL, which can in turn help reduce LDL.[5] You should always follow your doctor’s advice when starting an exercise regime, and think of different ways you can add more movement to your routine to keep motivated. You can try brisk walking, riding a bike, playing a favourite sport, or joining a gym. Chair-based exercises, when combined with a healthy diet, can also improve your cholesterol levels.[6]

References:

1. Different fats explained. NHS.
2. Fresh or Frozen vegetables: which is best? British Heart Foundation
3. Sleep and tiredness. NHS.
4. High cholesterol. Mayo Clinic.
5. How to lower your cholesterol. NHS.
6. Exercise can improve your health. HeartUK.org.uk

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Reduce or cut out alcohol



If you choose to drink alcohol, moderation is key. Try, where possible, to follow the limits set out in the latest guidance. Both men and women are advised to drink no more than 14 units of alcohol a week, over 3 or more days. [7]

Heavy drinking, or 'binge' drinking, can raise bad LDL cholesterol, and also increase liver fat. This can elevate your risk of both heart and liver disease.[8]

Protect your mental wellbeing and your relationships



Managing stress and looking after your mental and emotional health, with activities like relaxation, talking to someone, meditating, spending time with family and friends, can help stop unhealthy stress from leading to bad habits that can raise cholesterol, such as unhealthy eating and indulging in bad habits like smoking or drinking too much.[9]

Reduce smoking

You can improve your HDL cholesterol if you're a smoker by stopping or reducing the amount you smoke. Smoking makes the LDL cholesterol cling to your arteries, which can clog them up and increase your risk of heart attacks or strokes.[10] Vaping, while considered a better alternative to smoking tobacco, can also negatively impact your cholesterol by destabilising existing cholesterol plaques in your arteries.[11]



There are a couple of ways you can get support to quit smoking. You can ask your doctor about group consultations or smoking cessation sessions. As hard as it is to give up, you will feel the benefits in as little as a week.

References:

7. UK low risk drinking guide. DrinkAware
8. Alcohol. HeartUK.org.uk.
9. Mental wellbeing. NHS.
10. Can smoking affect your cholesterol? Healthline.com
11. Majid S et al. Lipid profiles in users of combustible and electronic cigarettes. Vasc Med. 2021

The advice contained within this factsheet is as accurate and as comprehensive as possible, but it is only general advice, and should not be used as a substitute for the individual advice received from consulting a person's own doctor.
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