

Heart Smarts: Cholesterol

By: Lisa Franzen-Castle, RD, PhD, Nutrition Specialist;
UNL Panhandle Research and Extension Center
Author E-mail: lfranzen2@unl.edu



More than 65 million Americans have high blood cholesterol, a serious condition that increases risk for heart disease. High blood cholesterol itself does not cause symptoms, so many are unaware their levels are too high. Lowering cholesterol levels that are too high lessens the risk of developing heart disease and reduces the chance of having a heart attack or dying of heart disease. Everyone age 20 and older should have their cholesterol measured at least once every 5 years.



Tips to Stay Heart Smart about Cholesterol:

Know your numbers.

- Knowing your total cholesterol and high-density lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol can give you a general idea about cholesterol levels. For total cholesterol, a desirable number is less than 200 mg/dL.
- HDL (good) cholesterol protects against heart disease, so for HDL, higher numbers are better. A level less than 40 mg/dL is low and considered a major risk factor. HDL levels of 60 mg/dL or more help to lower your risk for heart disease.



Nutrition matters.

- Soluble fiber helps reduce low-density lipoprotein (LDL), the "bad" cholesterol, and foods such as oatmeal, beans (such as kidney black, pinto and navy beans), apples, pears, barley and prunes contain soluble fiber.
- Eating fatty fish (such as mackerel, lake trout, herring, sardines, Albacore tuna, salmon, and halibut) can be heart-healthy because of omega-3 fatty acid content, which can reduce blood pressure and risk of developing blood clots. Doctors recommend getting at least two servings of fish a week.
- Walnuts, almonds and other nuts can also help reduce blood cholesterol.



Choose healthier fats.

- A high intake of saturated fat is associated with high levels of total cholesterol and LDL cholesterol. Limit foods high in saturated fat and replace them with foods rich in mono-unsaturated and polyunsaturated fat.
- When making food at home, replace solid fats (e.g., butter and lard) with vegetable oils rich in monounsaturated fats (such as canola, olive, and safflower oils) and polyunsaturated fats (such as soybean, corn, and cottonseed oils) and trim fat from meat. When purchasing food, buy fat-free or low-fat milk and cheese.



Physical activity.

- Regular physical activity is recommended for everyone. Research shows exercise helps prevent heart disease and obesity, lowers blood pressure and LDL cholesterol, and raises HDL cholesterol.
- Aim for 30 to 60 minutes on most days. You can even spread it out over the course of your day. Adding physical activity, even in 10-minute intervals throughout the day, can help with weight loss and maintenance.
- Remember to try different activities and find something you enjoy. Finding a workout buddy or group may also be helpful and keep you accountable.
- Try taking a 10 minute walk over your lunch hour with a co-worker, riding your bike to work, swimming some laps, working on your garden, or playing your favorite sport. Take the stairs instead of the elevator or do some exercises during the commercial breaks of your favorite TV shows (there can be up to 20 minutes of commercials in an hour long program).



Know how. Know now.



Extension is a Division of the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln cooperating with the Counties and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension educational programs abide with the non-discrimination policies of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and the United States Department of Agriculture.

Weight and cholesterol.

- Being overweight is a risk factor for heart disease. Losing weight can help lower your LDL, triglyceride, and total cholesterol levels, as well as raise your HDL levels. Losing as little as 5 to 10 pounds can help reduce cholesterol.
- Consider your barriers to losing weight and ways to overcome them. If you eat when you're bored or frustrated, do something physically active instead. If you eat fast food for lunch, pack something healthier from home.
- Consider bringing a smart snack bag to work or having a smart snack drawer to help you avoid the temptation of the vending machine or treats at the workplace. Examples of great snacks to have on hand are whole fruits such as apples, oranges and bananas, dried fruit (lots of variety available), whole grain cereal, graham crackers, peanut butter with apples or whole grain crackers, and a variety of nuts.

Many things can impact cholesterol levels. While age, gender, and heredity are things you cannot do anything about, nutrition, physical activity level, and weight status are things you can do something about. Take time get your levels checked if you never have or it has been longer than five years. Check out [food.unl.edu](http://www.food.unl.edu) for more food, nutrition, and health information.

Additional Resources:

- **Omega-3 and Omega-6 fatty Acids.** Omega-3 and Omega-6 fatty acids, found in foods, are important to health. Learn how much you need and which foods are the best sources. <http://www.ianrpubs.unl.edu/sendIt/g2032.pdf>
- **How Much Sodium Are You Eating?** Although some sodium is good for the body, Americans typically consume about twice the amount considered healthy. Learn how to reduce sodium intake through food choices. <http://www.ianrpubs.unl.edu/sendIt/g1974.pdf>
- **Dietary Fiber.** Food fibers are the part of plant foods that remain undigested. Consumers and researchers are increasingly interested in the role that dietary fibers play in maintaining the body's health. <http://www.ianrpubs.unl.edu/sendIt/g1610.pdf>

- **Put Laughter and Humor in Your Life.** Humor and Laughter can counteract the debilitating effects of stress. <http://www.ianrpubs.unl.edu/sendIt/g1631.pdf>

Sources:

1. National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute, National Institutes of Health (NIH). 2010. National Cholesterol Education Month. US Dept. of Health and Human Services (USDHHS). Accessed at: <http://hp2010.nhlbihin.net/cholmonth/>. Accessed on: August 15, 2011.
2. National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute, National Institutes of Health (NIH), Public Health Service. June 2005. High Blood Cholesterol, What you need to know. (USDHHS). NIH Publication No. 05-3290. Accessed at: <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/heart/chol/wyntk.pdf>. Accessed on: August 15, 2011.
3. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). December 2009. Statistical Reports. Accessed at: http://www.cdc.gov/heartdisease/statistical_reports.htm. Accessed on: August 17, 2011.
4. American Heart Association (AHA). 2011. Heart and Stroke Statistics. Accessed at: http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/General/Heart-and-Stroke-Association-Statistics_UCM_319064_SubHomePage.jsp. Accessed on: August 25, 2011.
5. Dietary Guidelines for Americans. 2010. Chapter 3: Foods and Food Components to Reduce. Accessed at: <http://www.cnpp.usda.gov/Publications/DietaryGuidelines/2010/PolicyDoc/Chapter3.pdf>. Accessed on: August 20, 2011.
6. Mayo Clinic Staff. May 2010. Top 5 lifestyle changes to reduce cholesterol. Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research. Accessed at: <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/reduce-cholesterol/CL00012>. Accessed on: August 25, 2011.
7. Mayo Clinic Staff. May 2010. Cholesterol: Top 5 foods to lower your numbers. Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research. Accessed at: <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/cholesterol/CL00002>. Accessed on: August 25, 2011.

Updated: September 2011