

What is

blood cholesterol

When we think of cholesterol, it can be confusing. We associate cholesterol with poor health, and as a key contributor of heart disease. But the fact is that your body needs cholesterol – it is an important component of cell membranes, hormones and vitamin D. Cholesterol is so important to us, that our bodies couldn't function without it.

Bad cholesterol, also known as low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol, is known to increase the build-up of plaque in your artery walls. The "good" cholesterol is called high-density lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol—it helps carry LDL-cholesterol away from your artery walls.

Through a combination of exercise and monitoring your diet, you can lower your LDL-cholesterol and increase your HDL-cholesterol. This is a lifelong commitment, and can involve changing your lifestyle and trying to incorporate good eating habits and physical exercise into your daily routine.

What kind of foods should I eat?

There's a good chance that people who have high cholesterol may have developed it partly due to the types of foods they eat. Foods high in fat contribute significantly to higher cholesterol levels, as do fast foods and prepared foods, and there is certainly an abundance of both in contemporary North America.

According to The College of Family Physicians of Canada, you should limit foods that are high in fat, including: sausage and organ meats (like liver); whole milk; ice cream; eggs and bacon; potato chips; french fries; and pastries and doughnuts. What foods can help lower your bad cholesterol and increase your good cholesterol? Well, some of these foods include:

fish, chicken without the skin, lean beef; skim or low-fat milk; egg whites; fruit; steamed vegetables; pretzels, air-popped popcorn, bagels, English muffins; and baked potatoes.

The important thing to remember is that if you have had a poor diet or bad eating choices for several years, you aren't simply going to be able to change those habits overnight. So don't be too hard on yourself if you deviate from the "good" foods from time to time. It's hard to change your diet overnight, especially if you've been partial to fast food over the years. Take small steps towards your new diet, but try to incorporate these new, healthier foods into your everyday routine.





Cholesterol myths

With more interest in our overall health and cholesterol levels these days, there are certainly some incorrect ideas floating around on this topic. **Making the Connection**[®] is a program dedicated to the ongoing education of Canadians about the dangers of high cholesterol, and to encouraging Canadians to take action to control high cholesterol to reduce the risk of heart attack and stroke. **Making the Connection**[®] is a partnership of the Canadian Lipid Nurse Network, the Canadian Association of Cardiac Rehabilitation, Diabetes Québec, the Heart and Stroke Foundation, the Canadian Diabetes Association, Blood Pressure Canada, and Pfizer Canada Inc. www.makingtheconnection.ca provides some common misconceptions about cholesterol.

Myth— Most cholesterol comes from the food we eat

Only up to 20% of the cholesterol we need comes from the food we eat. The other 80% comes from our liver, which makes cholesterol from the fats found in various foods. Therefore, you should try to reduce your total fat consumption, rather than just limiting your cholesterol intake.

Myth— Eliminating meats, cheeses and fats from my diet will make everything okay

Getting rid of one or two food groups may not be a healthy way to manage your cholesterol. The most important thing is portion control. Limiting your fat and cholesterol intake can make a huge difference.

Myth— A few drinks every day are good for you

Moderate amounts of alcohol do seem to increase HDL ("good") cholesterol. This occurs with two drinks daily for men and one drink daily for women. Among liquors, red wine and dark beers appear to have additional "antioxidant" properties. But other beverages seem to be just as helpful, particularly green tea or grape juice.

Taking control of your cholesterol

If you do have high cholesterol, there are several steps you can take to help reduce it. When was the last time you had your cholesterol checked? According to the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada, you should ask your doctor to check your cholesterol if you are male and over 40, or female and over 50 (or post-menopausal). As an important step towards lowering your cholesterol, you should try to reduce your fat intake to 20-35% of your daily calories.

Also, try to avoid trans fats which are found in fast foods and many pre-made foods. Trans fats increase bad cholesterol and decrease good cholesterol. You can consult Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating to plan a better diet. Eat more whole grains, cereals, vegetables and fruit. If you're a smoker, you should make your best effort to quit: smoking increases LDL-cholesterol.

Some helpful resources

There are an abundance of websites on the internet that deal with cholesterol. Here are a few selected sites which you may want to visit to learn more:

INFO Visit www.heartandstroke.ca for a plethora of information about cholesterol, and how it plays a factor in your heart health.

INFO Visit cfpc.ca/English/cfpc/programs/patient%20education/cholesterol/default.asp?s=1 which is The College of Family Physicians of Canada website. Here you will find a one-page summary about cholesterol, including the best foods to eat and those to avoid.

INFO Visit www.makingtheconnection.ca to register for a customized cholesterol management program.

INFO Visit chealth.canoe.ca/channel_main.asp?channel_id=151 to find out about cholesterol, including testing, questions for your doctor, how high cholesterol affects your blood vessels, and much more.