How Can I Improve My Cholesterol?

Most heart and blood vessel disease is caused by a buildup of cholesterol, plaque and other fatty deposits in artery walls. The arteries that feed the heart can become so clogged the blood flow is reduced, causing chest pain. If a blood clot forms and blocks the artery, a heart attack can occur. If a blood clot blocks an artery leading to or in the brain, a stroke results.

You can make lifestyle changes to improve your cholesterol. You can eat heart-healthy foods, reach and maintain a healthy weight, be physically active and not smoke. Some people also need to take medicine.

Your doctor can help you create a plan to improve your cholesterol. It’s important to follow your plan and discuss any concerns you have with your doctor.

What should I eat?

Focus on foods low in saturated and trans fats such as:
- A variety of fruits and vegetables.
- A variety of whole grain foods such as whole-grain bread, cereal, pasta and brown rice. At least half of the servings should be whole grains.
- Fat-free, 1% and low-fat milk products.
- Skinless poultry and lean meats. When you choose to eat red meat and pork, select options labeled “loin” and “round.” These cuts usually have the least amount of fat.
- Fatty fish such as salmon, trout, albacore tuna and sardines. Enjoy at least 8 ounces of non-fried fish each week.
- Unsalted nuts, seeds, and legumes (dried beans or peas).
- Nontropical vegetable oils like canola, corn, olive, or safflower oils.

What should I limit?

- Foods with a lot of sodium (salt)
- Sweets and sugar-sweetened beverages
- Red meats and fatty meats that aren’t trimmed
- Processed meats such as bologna, salami and sausage
- Full-fat dairy products such as whole milk, cream, ice cream, butter and cheese
- Baked goods made with saturated and trans fats such as donuts, cakes and cookies
- Foods that list the words “hydrogenated oils” in the ingredients panel
- Saturated oils like coconut oil, palm oil and palm kernel oil
- Solid fats like shortening, stick margarine and lard
- Fried foods
What are some cooking tips?

- Add a variety of fruits and vegetables to your meals.
- Use a rack to drain off fat when you broil, roast or bake poultry and meats.
- Look for leaner cuts if you choose to eat meat.
- Don’t baste with drippings; use wine, fruit juice or marinade.
- Broil or grill instead of pan-frying.
- Cut off all visible fat from meat before cooking.
- Remove the skin from poultry.
- Use a vegetable oil spray to brown or sauté foods.
- Serve smaller portions of higher-calorie dishes.
- Use low-fat, low-sodium options instead of regular cheese.

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Do you have questions for your doctor or nurse?

Take a few minutes to write down your questions for the next time you see your health care professional.

For example:
- What about eating out?
- Why are weight control and physical activity important?

MY QUESTIONS:

We have many other fact sheets to help you make healthier choices to reduce your risk, manage your condition or care for a loved one. Visit heart.org/AnswersByHeart to learn more.