

Lower Your Cholesterol

By: *Reader's Digest*

Ten ways to get the numbers down.



No doubt you've heard it a thousand times by now: Heart disease is the number one killer among both men and women. And about half of all adults in America have cholesterol levels that are too high--which means there's a good chance yours are. If you haven't had them checked lately, don't ignore it any longer.

Cholesterol, the naturally occurring waxy substance produced by your body, isn't a bad thing--unless you have too much of the bad kind. Then it contributes to the formation of artery-clogging plaque, increasing your risk of heart disease and stroke.

Bad kind? That's right. You have two main types of cholesterol: Low-density lipoprotein, or LDL (the "bad" cholesterol), and high-density lipoprotein, or HDL (the "good" cholesterol). LDL carries cholesterol into your arteries, and HDL carries it away to your liver. Needless to say, the less LDL and the more HDL you have the better. Beyond that basic fact, other details matter too, like the size of your LDL particles. Smaller, denser LDL particles are more dangerous because it's easier for them to burrow into artery walls.

If you have high cholesterol, your doctor may put you on cholesterol-lowering medication. But even if he does, pay special attention to the tips in this chapter. Because research suggests that by eating the right foods, getting enough exercise, and generally taking good care of yourself, you could slash your risk of dying from heart disease by an incredible 80 percent.

1. Drink two glasses of orange juice every morning. But make it Minute Maid's HeartWise or another brand spiked with the same kind of cholesterol-lowering plant sterols found in margarine spreads like Benecol. When researchers at the University of California-Davis asked 72 men and women with mildly high cholesterol to drink either HeartWise or regular OJ, those drinking the sterol-fortified juice found their total cholesterol levels dropped 7 percent (an average of 13 points) and levels of "bad" LDL cholesterol dropped 13 percent (an average of 8 points). Those who drank regular juice had no changes. But maybe they weren't drinking enough: Another study, this one from the University of Western Ontario, found that three glasses a day of orange juice--any orange juice--for four weeks raised HDL levels 21 percent and improved the ratio of good to bad cholesterol by 16 percent.

2. Eat six or more small meals a day. A large study of British adults found that people who ate six or more times a day had significantly lower cholesterol than those who ate twice a day, even though the "grazers" got more calories and fat! In fact, the differences in cholesterol between the two groups were large enough to reduce the grazers' risk of coronary heart disease 10-20 percent. Just make sure those six meals are truly small.

3. Quaff a glass of wine every evening with dinner. Studies find a daily glass of wine or beer a day can boost levels of HDL cholesterol. Make the wine a red one--red wines are 3-10 times higher in plant compounds called saponins believed to be responsible for much of wine's beneficial effects on cholesterol.

4. Fix all your sandwiches on whole grain bread. Simply cutting back on simple carbs like white bread and eating more complex carbs, like whole grain bread and brown rice, can increase HDL levels slightly and significantly lower triglycerides, another type of blood fat that contributes to heart disease.

5. Use paper filters when brewing your coffee and skip the espresso. Two substances found in brewed coffee, kahweol and cafestol, increase cholesterol levels. But paper filters trap these compounds, so they're only a problem if you drink espresso or use coffeemakers without filters.

6. Use olive oil in your homemade salad dressing tonight. A Baylor College of Medicine study found that diets rich in the kind of monounsaturated fat found in olive oil reduced LDL cholesterol in people with diabetes or metabolic syndrome--a cluster of risk factors including low HDL, high insulin levels, and overweight--just as well as following a low-fat diet.

7. Sip a cup of black tea every four hours. Government scientists found that three weeks of drinking five cups a day of black tea reduced cholesterol levels in people with mildly high levels.

8. Add half a tablespoon of cinnamon to your coffee beans (ground or whole) before starting the pot. A Pakistani study found that 6 grams cinnamon a day (about 1/2 tablespoon) reduced LDL cholesterol in people with type 2 diabetes nearly 30 percent and cut total cholesterol 26 percent.

9. Have oatmeal for breakfast every morning. There's a reason oat manufacturers are allowed to boast about the grain's cholesterol-lowering benefits: Plenty of research has proved them. Rich in a soluble fiber called beta glucan, oatmeal can drop your LDL 12-24 percent if you eat one and a half cups regularly. Choose quickcooking or old-fashioned oats over instant.

10. This week, have a few glasses of cranberry juice every day (cut it with seltzer or water so you get less sugar). Cranberries are rich sources of anthocyanins, flavonols, and proanthocyanidins, plant chemicals that prevent LDL cholesterol from oxidizing, a process that makes it more likely to stick to artery walls. These chemicals also keep red blood cells from getting too sticky. An added bonus: They initiate a complex chemical reaction that helps blood vessels relax. Plus (the part you were waiting for) they decrease LDL cholesterol levels. Not only that, but University of Scranton researchers reported that three glasses of cranberry juice a day can raise HDL levels up to 10 percent.