

Can I reduce my cholesterol levels?

“Dear Lynda

I have just been diagnosed with high cholesterol and my doctor has prescribed Atorvastatin. He talked to me about the different types of cholesterol but I did not write anything down and now I feel a bit confused. It would be really helpful if you could please explain about the different types of cholesterol. Also any foods that can help lower my cholesterol level. Thank you.”

For many years high cholesterol was thought to be caused by a high fat diet and all types of fats were considered to be “bad” fats. Research has now confirmed that there are “good” and “bad” cholesterol. Cholesterol, a fatlike substance, is present in the blood and most tissues and is essential for proper brain and nerve function. Cholesterol and its esters are important constituents of cell membranes and are precursors of many steroid hormones and bile salts. When cholesterol is absorbed into the bloodstream it is carried to the arteries by a lipoprotein (fat/protein complex) called LDL i.e. low-density lipoprotein, which is the major transporter of cholesterol in the bloodstream. Research has established that if a large proportion of a person’s serum cholesterol is combined with LDL it is more likely to be deposited in the artery walls. Therefore LDL is known as “bad cholesterol”. Another Lipoprotein called HDL i.e. high-density lipoprotein has the ability to take cholesterol out of the arteries and back to the liver and therefore is considered the “good cholesterol”.

It is also thought that a high blood cholesterol level, especially elevated LDL is a contributor to plaque building up in the arteries and impeding blood flow to the brain, kidneys, genitals, extremities and heart. It has been identified as the major cause of heart disease because cholesterol produces deposits in arteries. High LDL levels may also be implicated in gallstones, impotence (this is often caused by the drugs prescribed to deal with high cholesterol), mental impairment and high blood pressure.

There is confusion concerning cholesterol and it is important to distinguish between serum cholesterol and dietary cholesterol. Serum cholesterol is the cholesterol in the bloodstream. Dietary cholesterol is cholesterol that is present in food. Levels of cholesterol are influenced by diet but they are also affected by your genetic makeup. When we eat foods high in cholesterol and/or saturated fat this increases cholesterol levels.

I suggest you include the following cholesterol-lowering foods in your diet: apples, bananas, carrots, cold-water fish, dried beans, garlic, grapefruit, and olive oil. Olive oil is a source of monounsaturated fat and research shows that it helps to reduce (bad) LDL cholesterol and helps keep your arteries fluid. Eat plenty of fiber in the form of fruits, vegetables and whole grains. Also include oat bran and brown rice. Drink fresh juices, especially carrot, celery and beet juices.

Carrot juice is excellent at flushing out fat from the bile in the liver which helps lower cholesterol. Nuts are best avoided except, raw unsalted walnuts and almonds. Almonds are a rich source of the amino acid arginine and research has indicated they can reduce cholesterol levels. Reduce the amount of saturated fat in your diet. Saturated fats are found in all animal foods as well as coconut and palm kernel oils. It is best to eliminate all hydrogenated fats and hardened fats and oils such as margarine, lard, and butter from your diet. You should also try and avoid animal products especially pork and pork products so no sausages! Health experts also state no alcohol, cakes, biscuits, carbonated drinks, coffee, gravies, processed or refined foods, caffeine, tobacco, and white bread. I would also recommend regular moderate exercise which is always beneficial but please consult your Doctor before beginning any new exercise programme.

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