

Cholesterol

Mere mention of the word is enough to draw a collective shudder from health conscious people everywhere. But take heart, not all cholesterol is the enemy.

In fact, cholesterol is a necessary constituent of every cell in the body, and is needed for the production of many hormones. Of course, cholesterol can also be a health risk if it isn't proportioned correctly or your numbers are too high.

There are essentially two types of cholesterol: HDL (high-density lipoprotein), which is good cholesterol LDL (low-density lipoprotein), which is bad cholesterol

Lowering the bad cholesterol and striking a balance with good cholesterol is one of the best things you can do for health.

How low should you go? Recent news reports have focused on the topic of adjusting cholesterol levels for good heart health. Some research suggests people should reduce LDL (bad cholesterol) to levels significantly below what was considered acceptable in the past. But how low should your cholesterol really be to promote heart health?

The research is out and many medical articles published over the last two years seem to support the idea that the target for LDL cholesterol should be below 80. The previous guidelines recommended 130 for prevention of heart disease and 100 for treatment of people with established disease.

Leading the way For the last several years, long before the current trend, Canyon Ranch recommended a target of 80 or below. The published research now supports this relatively aggressive, proactive stance. With all the latest research, there is ample reason to believe that now your ultimate goal should be to reach LDL levels in the 70s or below.

Similarly, the Ranch has always been ahead of the curve on other risk factors such as homocysteine, Lp (a), and other less standard factors that can affect heart health.

The real issue with cholesterol is the relationship between lowering LDL and the process of plaque formation, which is an inflammatory and oxidative process.

Heart disease and inflammation Medical experts now see heart disease as an inflammation, much like arthritis. As you follow the markers of inflammation - CRP (C-reactive protein) and fibrinogen - it becomes even clearer that controlling inflammation is key to containing or preventing heart disease. CRP is a somewhat better predictor of future heart events than LDL levels, but there are no drugs available to successfully reduce CRP.

The well-known statin drugs can work two ways: They can reduce inflammation directly (through a mechanism that remains unclear), or they lower the LDL that is the cause of the inflammation.

In one study, dietary and herbal intervention combined with a statin drug successfully lowered CRP in cases where the LDL level was equally lowered. So, the relationship between LDL, inflammation and heart disease is still unclear, but progress has been made.

A low-fat diet isn't always the answer The idea that simply eating a low-fat diet improves your cholesterol is only partially true. In the past, low-fat diets were recommended because saturated animal fats were found to raise LDL cholesterol.

Experts have become more aware of the importance of the ratio of HDL to LDL, and have found that extremely low-fat diets are not always good because they often include excessive amounts of highly processed carbohydrates like sugar and refined grains. These types of carbohydrates can actually lower good cholesterol and make your overall cholesterol pattern worse.

To lower your LDL cholesterol levels and raise your HDL, focus on healthy, high-quality fats and oils while limiting processed sugar, refined grains and flour, and avoiding saturated and trans fats.

- Diet and lifestyle tips for lowering your cholesterol
- Increase your intake of high-fiber carbohydrates in vegetables and fruits, beans, nuts, seeds, whole grains such as whole wheat and wheat germ, brown rice, quinoa, millet and whole oats.
- Add color. Choose red or sweet potatoes instead of white.
- Look for whole-grain cereals with no added sugar.
- Limit sweet baked goods such as cookies, cakes, muffins and pastries to rare treats.
- Exercise. Aerobic exercise is best and is as important as any dietary changes you make.
- Get an "oil change." Use olive oil, fish and fish oil, flaxseed oil, nuts and natural nut butters instead of animal fats, dairy fats and hydrogenated oils.
- Add soy foods such as tofu, tempeh, edamame and miso.
- Don't be afraid of eggs. An egg or two a day will not raise your blood cholesterol level, and eggs are a good source of protein, omega-3 fat, vitamins and minerals.
- Take a good multivitamin that includes folic acid, vitamins B6, B12 and B3 (niacin) as well as trace minerals.

Many ways to treat cholesterol When diet and exercise are not enough to lower the bad cholesterol, medication can be an option. But more potent statins may not necessarily be the answer to reducing cholesterol and inflammation either.

Drug toxicity, however, is a serious concern because it is much more common at higher doses. Therefore, for substantial LDL reductions it may be wise to use a combination of a low-dose statin with another drug that prevents cholesterol absorption in the gut without causing side effects.

Start today. As with any health program, it's important to confer with your physician and monitor your progress. Get a baseline cholesterol profile (including total cholesterol, HDL, LDL, and triglycerides) so you know where you are and how you are improving.