

## 8 Things You Don't Know About Cholesterol

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By Barbara Brody | November 15, 2017

**Many dangerous myths persist about this blood fat. Here, we clear them up—because your health depends on it.**



*SilverSneakers Cholesterol*

You'd think we'd all understand cholesterol by now, especially considering that screenings are recommended at least every five years and millions of Americans take cholesterol-lowering medication. But doctors say that's not the case. Many dangerous myths persist.

Below, we set the record straight with eight important—yet not-so-well-known—facts about this blood fat.

#### 1. Cholesterol Is Important to Your Health

While too much raises your chances of having a heart attack, cholesterol actually serves some pretty

important functions.

“Cholesterol is essential to various bodily processes, from insulating nerve cells in the brain to providing structure for the composition of cell membranes,” says Amgad N. Makaryus, M.D., an associate professor at Hofstra Northwell School of Medicine and chairman of cardiac care at Nassau University Medical Center. You also need it to make vitamin D, certain hormones, and some enzymes that help break down food.

Another key point: You'll want to pay attention to all your cholesterol numbers, not just total cholesterol. That's because cholesterol—a waxy, fatty substance—is carried through the bloodstream by two types of particles: low-density lipoproteins (LDL) and high-density lipoproteins (HDL).

LDL is often called the “bad” kind because it deposits plaque in the arteries, Dr. Makaryus explains. HDL, on the other hand, is often called “good” because its job is to take excess cholesterol out of your arteries and shunt it to the liver, where it can be broken down.

The American Heart Association (AHA) recommends talking to your doctor about your cholesterol numbers and how it affects your health. In general, the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute recommends:

- Total cholesterol: Under 200 mg/dL
- LDL cholesterol: Under 100 mg/dL
- HDL cholesterol: Over 60 mg/dL

#### 2. High-Cholesterol Foods Probably Won't Raise Your Levels

Unless you're allergic or your doctor has specifically told you otherwise, go ahead and order the omelet.

"It's true that eggs and shrimp contain a lot of dietary cholesterol, but dietary cholesterol isn't nearly as dangerous as was once thought," Dr. Makaryus says. "Only some of the cholesterol in food ends up as cholesterol in your bloodstream, and if dietary cholesterol intake rises, the body generally compensates by producing less cholesterol of its own."

While you don't want to overdo it with high-cholesterol foods, Dr. Makaryus adds, eating an egg or two or having shrimp a few times a week is not dangerous.

### **3. Your Dietary Priority: Cut Back on Saturated and Trans Fats**

While eating some cholesterol-containing foods might not raise your numbers, getting too much saturated fat—found in butter, cheese, red meat, and other animal products—definitely will.

"Strong evidence indicates that saturated fat in the diet is positively associated with increased total and LDL cholesterol, and increased risk of cardiovascular disease," says Ginger Hultin, R.D.N., a Seattle-based dietitian and spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics.

Less than 10 percent of your calories each day should come from saturated fats, according to the 2015 Dietary Guidelines for Americans. To lower cholesterol, the AHA recommends limiting to 6 percent of your daily calories.

Meanwhile, you should consider trans fats—found in any packaged goods that list "hydrogenated" or "partially hydrogenated" oils among the ingredients—totally off-limits. They're especially harmful because they raise LDL (bad cholesterol) while also lowering HDL (good cholesterol). In fact, the Food and Drug Administration has determined that eliminating trans fats could prevent "thousands of heart attacks and deaths each year

### **4. Sugar Also Messes With Cholesterol**

Fats might seem like the biggest dietary demons, but carbohydrate intake is another crucial factor. "Cutting saturated and trans fats is important, but if you're replacing them with foods that are high in sugar and processed or refined carbohydrates—think soda, candy, baked goods—then you may still struggle with cholesterol levels and an increased cardiovascular disease risk," Hultin says.

In fact, some research suggests that sugar might turn out to be just as dangerous for your heart than saturated fat—or perhaps even more so.

Good news: These tips for clean eating can help you cut back on saturated fat, trans fat, and added sugar. You'll not only help your heart. You'll also boost your energy.

### **5. You Don't Have to Be Overweight to Have a Cholesterol Problem**

It's true that high cholesterol and obesity often go hand in hand. If you're overweight, "losing about 5 to 10 percent of your weight can significantly reduce blood cholesterol," Dr. Makaryus says. For someone who is 200 pounds, 5 percent is 10 pounds. Tip: Skip the crash diet, and check out the best way to lose weight after age 60

What if you're at a relatively healthy weight? Unfortunately, you may still have cholesterol issues. "Certain factors, such as genetic inheritance and family history, may cause cholesterol levels to be high in an individual despite being thin," Dr. Makaryus says. That's why it's important to get your cholesterol checked as recommended by your doctor.

## 6. Exercise Is a Friend to Good Cholesterol

If your doctor has told you that your cholesterol levels need improvement, lifestyle changes are key—though prescription medication may also be in order, depending on your numbers and other risk factors for heart disease. Exercise is a biggie, and it primarily helps by raising HDL (good cholesterol), Dr. Makaryus says.

## 7. Bad Cholesterol Has an Archenemy, and Its Name Is Fiber

"Some foods absolutely do affect your cholesterol," says Hultin, noting that items like oats, beans, flaxseeds, whole grains, and fruits and vegetables are helpful because they're high in fiber. "Fiber molecules actually bind to cholesterol molecules and escort them out of the body via the digestive system."

But you can't just have a bowl of oatmeal for breakfast and eat tons of fast food and sweets the rest of the day. "People need to take a more holistic approach," she says. "What is your general diet like—the collection of foods you eat each day?"

While there are a number of different heart-healthy eating plans, like the Mediterranean diet or DASH diet, they all tend to have a few things in common:

- Plenty of produce and whole grains
- Some lean protein, like poultry and fish
- Not too much sugar or saturated fat

## 8. If You Smoke, Quitting Will Improve Your HDL

Yes, nixing cigarettes will help your lungs, but it may also give your HDL (good cholesterol) a much-needed boost. That's true even if you end up putting on a few pounds after you stop smoking, according to research published in the *American Heart Journal*

That's not all. Quitting also helps lower your risk of a heart attack and in a myriad of ways, from decreasing blood pressure to protecting against blood clots.

No matter your age or how long you've been smoking, there's no time like now to stop. If you smoke, ask your doctor for help quitting, which can greatly increase your chances of success. Plus, make sure to read this guide to smoking myths you may still believe

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