

Taking Charge of Your Cholesterol

Cholesterol. Some is vital; too much can be deadly. In fact, a heart attack might be the first sign that the fatty, waxy stuff has been clogging your arteries.

Here are 10 ways to take charge now:

1. Get screened!

Schedule a cholesterol test. Your goals: Total cholesterol should measure less than 200 (the number refers to milligrams per deciliter of blood). A score ranging from 200 to 239, borderline high, means you may be at increased risk for heart disease and stroke. If your total cholesterol is 240 or above, you are at increased risk. It's also important to find out your HDL ("good" cholesterol), LDL ("bad" cholesterol) and triglyceride scores. HDLs should measure at least 40 (50 for women), and a level of 60 is considered protective against heart disease. LDLs ideally should be under 130 and triglycerides under 150.

2. Shed excess pounds.

Obesity increases LDLs and triglycerides, and drives HDLs down. Sometimes those extra pounds can boost your cholesterol levels out of the healthy range.

3. Get moving.

Regular exercise seems to improve the ratio of good to bad cholesterol. How much exercise is enough? Aim for 30 minutes or more of moderate activity most days of the week, 60 to 90 minutes if you need to lose weight or maintain weight loss.

4. Stop smoking.

Smoking lowers HDL cholesterol and raises LDL cholesterol. HDL cholesterol is important because it sweeps away LDL cholesterol, the type that sticks to vessel walls.

5. Read labels and know what you're looking for.

Foods labeled "cholesterol free" still may raise cholesterol levels. Potato chips, for example, have no dietary cholesterol, but they're high in trans fats. What's the bottom line? Avoid foods high in trans and saturated fats, and limit your intake of dietary cholesterol, found in all animal products. Try to emphasize healthful fats, such as seeds and nuts, olive oil, avocados, and salmon, all of which may help raise HDL levels.

6. Get your fill of fiber.

Eating fiber-rich foods like dried peas and beans, legumes, apples, oat products, lentils and citrus fruits is a low-calorie way to satisfy hunger pangs. Those foods are also good sources of soluble fiber, which helps eliminate cholesterol from your bloodstream.

7. Patrol your plate.

Practice portion control, and it may be possible to enjoy all kinds of foods. (Consider that a serving of meat is three ounces – about the size of a deck of cards!)

8. Keep track of your daily cholesterol intake.

It may seem like a chore, but if you have high cholesterol it's worth figuring out where the cholesterol in your diet is coming from. A salad, say, may seem healthful until you pour on creamy dressing. According to the American Heart Association, adults should limit dietary cholesterol to 300 milligrams a day, 200 milligrams a day if they have heart disease or its risk factors.

9. Cook healthfully.

You could eat nothing but fruits, vegetables and fish and still have high cholesterol. How? Your cooking method. Breading, battering and frying add fat. Instead, steam, poach, grill or bake nutritious foods. Avoid cream sauces, and use reduced-fat dressings. Try nonstick cookware and sprays, and always remember to trim visible fat before cooking.

10. Put a lid on stress.

Research shows that stress can increase the body's cholesterol production. If you're often tense, think hard about what's causing you to feel that way. Is there something you can do to defuse those stress triggers? Find time for relaxing activities. If your stress level is so high that it's disrupting your life, enroll in a stress-reduction program at your hospital or talk to a therapist.



NASHOBA'S NEW CARDIOLOGY SUITE



Daniela Capriles, MD

John Carr, MD

Nashoba Valley Medical Center and SMG Nashoba Cardiology recently opened a newly renovated cardiology suite, conveniently located adjacent to the hospital, in the Medical Office Building, Suite 110, at 190 Groton Road in Ayer. At this new suite, Nashoba's expert Cardiologists John Carr, MD, and Daniela Capriles, MD, provide patients with consultative and ongoing cardiology care.

To schedule an appointment with Drs. Carr or Capriles, please call 978-784-9425.

