

Heart Disease: Lifestyle Changes to Manage Cholesterol



Having too much cholesterol can clog your blood vessels and lead to health problems, such as a heart attack or stroke. You can lower your risk for heart attack and stroke by lowering your cholesterol.

Managing your cholesterol is important for your health. It is especially important when you have heart problems, such as coronary artery disease (CAD).

Managing cholesterol with lifestyle changes

To manage your cholesterol, it is important to make lifestyle changes, whether you take medicines or not. These changes can help you control your cholesterol.

Ask your doctor about Therapeutic Lifestyle Changes (TLC). You will focus on getting active, eating a cholesterol-lowering diet (the TLC diet), and losing weight if you need to.

Getting active

Getting active can help you raise your HDL (good) cholesterol and lower your LDL (bad) cholesterol.

Before you start a new activity, talk to your doctor about how much exercise is safe. Start slowly, and go at a pace you can manage. Try to do at least 2½ hours of moderate exercise a week. One way to do this is to be active 30 minutes a day, at least 5 days a week.

Walking is an easy, low-cost way to be active. Walking with a partner helps you keep up a routine. Try using a pedometer to count your steps and set walking goals.

Here are some other ideas for getting active:

- Do yard work or garden.
- Play actively with your children or grandchildren.
- Go for a bike ride.
- Take the stairs whenever you can.
- Swim or take a water aerobics class.
- Join a health club or walking group.

No matter what you do, the key is making physical activity a regular, fun part of your life. And as soon as you start seeing the results, you'll be even more motivated to keep doing it.

Healthy eating

Healthy eating is key to lowering your cholesterol. Healthy eating starts with learning new ways to eat, such as adding more fresh fruits, vegetables, and whole grains and cutting back on foods that have a lot of fat, salt, and sugar. The TLC diet focuses on foods that are low in cholesterol, saturated fat, and trans fat. It includes:

- Lean meat, poultry, fish, and beans.
- Fruits and vegetables.
- Whole grains and cereals.

You can work with a dietitian to make a healthy eating plan.

Healthy weight

Getting active and eating a healthy diet can help you lose extra weight. This may help you lower your cholesterol.

You'll have more success getting to a healthy weight if you first change the way you think about certain things:

- Don't compare yourself to others. Healthy bodies come in all shapes and sizes.
- Pay attention to how hungry or how full you feel. When you eat, pay attention to why you're eating and how much you're eating.
- Decide that you're going to improve your health and plan exactly what you'll do to reach that goal.

It's not easy to make changes. But taking the time to really think about what will motivate or inspire you will help you reach your goals. Also, the more support you have for making a lifestyle change, the easier it is to make that change.

Tips for getting support

- Partner with someone who is also making lifestyle changes.
- Get friends and family involved.
- Join a class or workout group.
- Give yourself positive reinforcement.

Managing cholesterol with medicines

Statins are medicines that help lower your cholesterol. These medicines:

- Reduce how much cholesterol your body makes.
- Help you reach your cholesterol goal, along with lifestyle changes.
- May lower your risk of heart attack or stroke.

If your LDL goal is less than 100, your doctor will most likely have you take statins to help you reach this goal. If you are taking medicine for high cholesterol, make sure to take it every day or as your doctor says.

Most people do not have side effects with statins. If you have problems with side effects, such as muscle aches, call your doctor. You may be able to take a different statin or a lower dose.

It is important to make lifestyle changes even if you are taking medicine for your cholesterol.