

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Keeping Your Cholesterol in Check

When it comes to cholesterol, many of us have heard the warnings, and we're aware of the toll high cholesterol, otherwise known as inflated Low-density lipoprotein (LDL) or "bad" cholesterol, levels can take on our bodies. What we may not know is that simple day-to-day changes can keep LDL cholesterol levels at bay, and in turn reduce our risk of heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes and possibly even Alzheimer's disease.

If you suffer from high cholesterol, arm yourself with the knowledge you need and keep your levels in check. For best results, be sure to:

Get tested. A simple blood test can help you know where your cholesterol levels are at, so you can map out an appropriate plan of action. Because there are usually no symptoms of high cholesterol, many people don't find out they have the condition until a major health crisis (e.g., a heart attack). Take a preventative approach: Talk to you doctor about getting your LDL (or the "bad" cholesterol) and HDL (high-density lipoprotein or the "good" cholesterol) levels checked out every few years. While many people think high cholesterol is only a concern for later on in life, most doctors recommend starting testing in your 20s.

Recognize the risks. There are both manageable and uncontrollable factors that may put you at greater risk for developing high cholesterol. Uncontrollable aspects include a family history of high cholesterol, age (the older you are, the more at risk you are) and gender (post-menopausal women in general are more likely to have high cholesterol). Diet, exercise and weight are all considered important factors that can be managed. Some studies also suggest shift workers tend to have higher cholesterol levels than the general population. Therefore, if you tend to work long shifts, you may need to be more vigilant about managing the factors you can control, such as your sleeping and nutrition habits.

Exercise. If maintaining a healthy weight, boosting your mood, shedding stress and improving your quality of sleep aren't reason enough to get active, consider this: Regular physical exercise—especially aerobic exercise—has been shown to help reduce LDL or "bad" cholesterol levels and increase HDL or "good" cholesterol. Whether it's walking, indoor soccer or swimming a few times a week, choosing an activity or sport you enjoy will give you something to look forward to and encourage you to stick with it. Remember, it's always smart to consult a physician before starting a new exercise program.

Trim fat and cholesterol. Maintain healthy LDL levels by limiting the amount of cholesterol, saturated fat and trans fat you eat. The American Heart Association recommends that no more than 35 per cent of your total diet should come from fat, 7 per cent from saturated fat and less than 1 per cent from trans fats. Aside from reading labels more carefully, simple steps to lower your cholesterol, saturated and trans fat intake include:

- Switching to low fat milk products (1 per cent or less).
- Limiting your cheese, egg yolk and red meat consumption, and choosing leaner options when you do eat them.
- Cooking with polyunsaturated or monounsaturated oils such as sunflower, safflower, olive or canola instead of butter or hydrogenated margarines.

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Eating smart. Studies suggest there are a host of heart smart foods that not only taste great but can also cut LDL or “bad” cholesterol levels. These include:

- Nuts, especially hazelnuts, pecan, pistachios and walnuts.
- Soluble fiber found in fruits, vegetables, beans and grains. Oatmeal, in particular, has been shown to reduce LDL cholesterol by as much as 10 per cent when eaten regularly.
- Blueberries and grapes both contain pterostilbene, which scientists believe can help reduce cholesterol levels.

Get a helping hand. Depending on your risk factors, your doctor may recommend one of the several prescription medications available—in combination with a diet and exercise plan—to more effectively lower your LDL blood cholesterol levels. If this is the case, be sure to discuss any possible side effects with your doctor.

By consciously monitoring and managing your cholesterol levels, with the help of diet and exercise, you’ll look and feel better, inside and out. So the next time you think about skipping out on that cholesterol check, remember that taking a proactive approach to your cholesterol isn’t just a good idea —it’s one that can add years to your life.