

NATIONAL CHOLESTEROL EDUCATION MONTH

Increasing the GOOD Cholesterol



HDL (High Density Lipoproteins) cholesterol, or "good" cholesterol, appears to scour the walls of blood vessels, cleaning out excess cholesterol. It then carries that excess cholesterol -- which otherwise might have been used to make the "plaques" that cause coronary artery disease -- back to the liver for processing. So when we measure a person's HDL cholesterol level, we seem to be measuring how vigorously his or her blood vessels are being "scrubbed" free of cholesterol.

HDL Cholesterol Levels:

Below 40 mg/dL: result in an increased risk of coronary artery disease, even in people whose total cholesterol and LDL cholesterol levels are normal

Between 40 and 60 mg/dL: considered "normal"

Greater than 60 mg/dL: may protect people from heart disease.



Ways to Increase Your HDL Levels

1) Aerobic exercise

Many people don't like to hear it, but regular aerobic exercise (any exercise, such as walking, jogging or bike riding, that raises your heart rate for 20 to 30 minutes at a time) may be the most effective way to increase HDL levels. Recent evidence suggests that the duration of exercise, is the more important factor in raising HDL cholesterol. But any aerobic exercise helps.

2) Lose weight

Obesity results not only in increased LDL cholesterol, but also in reduced HDL cholesterol. If you are overweight, reducing your weight should increase your HDL levels. This is especially important if your excess weight is stored in your abdominal area; your waist-to-hip ratio is particularly important in determining whether you ought to concentrate on weight loss.

3) Stop smoking

If you smoke, giving up tobacco will result in an increase in HDL levels.

4) Cut out the trans fatty acids

Trans fatty acids are currently present in many of your favorite prepared foods -- anything in which the nutrition label reads "partially hydrogenated vegetable oils" -- so eliminating them from the diet is not a trivial task. But trans fatty acids not only increase LDL cholesterol levels, they also reduce HDL cholesterol levels. Removing them from your diet will almost certainly result in a measurable increase in HDL levels.

5) Alcohol

One or two drinks per day can significantly increase HDL levels. More than one or two drinks per day, one hastens to add, can lead to substantial health problems including heart failure -- and there are individuals who will develop such problems even when limiting their alcohol intake to one or two drinks per day.

6) Increase monounsaturated fats in your diet

Monounsaturated fats such as canola oil, avocado oil, or olive oil and in the fats found in peanut butter can increase HDL cholesterol levels without increasing the total cholesterol.

7) Add soluble fiber to your diet

Soluble fibers are found in oats, fruits, vegetables, and legumes, and result in both a reduction in LDL cholesterol and an increase HDL cholesterol. For best results, at least two servings a day should be used.

8) Other dietary means to increasing HDL

Cranberry juice has been shown to increase HDL levels. Fish and other foods containing omega-3 fatty acids can also increase HDL levels. In postmenopausal women (but not, apparently, in men or pre-menopausal women) calcium supplementation can increase HDL levels.