

Ask the nurse: Cholesterol and lifestyle changes



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Dear Liz,

Q. Can I lower my cholesterol without medication?

*Signed,
Wanting to manage
my high cholesterol*

A. Managing high cholesterol is an important part of having a healthy heart and may reduce your risk of developing heart disease and stroke. Although approximately 80 per cent of the cholesterol in our blood is manufactured in the liver, the remaining 20 per cent comes from our diet.

Lifestyle changes are the cornerstone of treatment for high cholesterol. Modifications to your diet, body weight, exercise regime and quitting smoking will all help you improve your blood cholesterol and help reduce your risk for heart disease and stroke.

1. Eating a healthy diet: It is best to limit your intake of fats, particularly saturated and trans fats, which are known to raise the levels of LDL or 'bad' cholesterol and decrease

HDL or 'good' cholesterol. Saturated and trans fats are found in animal fats, fried food, fast food and commercially prepared baked goods, and should be limited. Some foods are rich in dietary cholesterol which may impact your cholesterol levels, such as eggs, shellfish and organ meats and should be enjoyed only in moderation.

According to the Canadian Guidelines, dietary changes should include an increase in fruit and vegetable intake; an increase in the proportion of mono and polyunsaturated fats (such as corn, sunflower and canola oils); and a decrease in the proportion of saturated and trans-fatty acids (found in meat and dairy products and commercially prepared foods). For dairy products, choose products that are low or fat-free. An increase in the intake of omega-3 fatty acids from fish and plant sources is also recommended.

2. Achieve and maintain a healthy body weight. People who carry excess weight, particularly in the abdomen, are at higher risk for developing high cholesterol and heart disease.
3. Get active! Health Canada recommends Canadians get 30 to 60 minutes of physical activity at least four days per week. In addition to maintaining a healthy body weight, exercise also raises the level of HDL cholesterol.
4. If you smoke, quit. Smoking is the leading cause of preventable death in Canada. It also contributes to the development of atherosclerosis, or hardening of the arteries, which can reduce blood flow or cause ruptures within the arteries. Smoking also reduces the amount of HDL or "good" cholesterol in your blood.

If you need medication to help lower your high cholesterol, you are not alone. Since the liver produces cholesterol, there is only so much that lifestyle changes alone can do. Lifestyle changes are the first step to lowering your cholesterol; however, medication may be required to get cholesterol to target levels. Whether you need medication or not, be sure to maintain the lifestyle and diet changes not only for your heart health but for your overall well-being.

If you would like more information on managing your cholesterol levels, visit www.makingtheconnection.ca or call toll-free 1-877-4LOW-LDL (1-877-456-9535).

Healthy lifestyle choices for people with diabetes

All Canadians should maintain a healthy lifestyle, but making the right choices can be particularly important for people with diabetes. Following a balanced diet can help keep blood sugars in the target range and help maintain a healthy body weight. A diabetes-friendly meal plan will also help you make heart healthy meal choices to reduce your risk for heart disease.

Living a healthy lifestyle also includes being physically active. With regular exercise, you can keep your weight in a healthy range while also maintaining your heart health. To help you develop healthy eating habits and get physically active, speak with a dietitian, nurse or your physician, and learn as much as you can about proper diabetes management.

For more information on diabetes, diet and lifestyle changes, visit www.diabetes.ca or www.makingtheconnection.ca.