

- Cholesterol

Low and behold

Reveals four ways to keep your cholesterol levels in check

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IF YOU'VE got raised cholesterol, the first symptom you get could be a heart attack or stroke.



That's the scary reality of this fatty substance in our blood, which we actually need to stay healthy, because every cell in our body uses it. But too much of it can lead to a higher risk of cardiovascular problems, like heart attacks and strokes.

The British Heart Foundation (bhf.org.uk) estimates that close to half of UK adults have cholesterol levels above national guidelines (total cholesterol greater than 5mmol/L), yet new research by Novartis Pharmaceuticals (novartis.co.uk) shows 77% of people don't know what a good cholesterol level is in a healthy adult, and only 6% know the NHS recommends people aged over 40 get their cholesterol levels checked every five years. "Two out of every five people have raised cholesterol," says GP Dr Sarah Jarvis. "Many are living with a ticking time bomb without knowing it, and don't realise how vital cholesterol is to heart health.

"Too much cholesterol in your blood can clog your arteries and lead to heart attack and stroke.

"Yet if people don't have chest pain or palpitations and feel fine, they often assume they have nothing to worry about... until they have a serious health issue such as a heart attack."

There are two main types of cholesterol – high-density lipoproteins (HDL) is 'good' cholesterol, because it gets rid of the 'bad' non-highdensity lipoproteins (non-HDL) cholesterol from your blood, taking what you don't need back to the liver, where it's broken down.

Non-HDL cholesterol can build up inside blood vessel walls, causing narrowing of the arteries, which increases the risk of heart attacks or strokes. The BHF says nonHDL cholesterol is associated with one in four and circulatory disease deaths.

Cholesterol is produced naturally in the liver, and some comes from what we eat. The cholesterol charity Heart UK (heartuk.org.uk) says high cholesterol can be caused by many things, including lifestyle and health problems, plus age – high cholesterol is more likely as you get older; gender – men are more likely to have high cholesterol; and family history – around one in 250 people have familial hypercholesterolaemia (FH), an inherited condition where cholesterol levels are higher than normal from birth.

Here's what you can do to help lower your cholesterol...

1. Eat a heart healthy diet

Heart UK recommends you cut down on saturated fats and replace some with unsaturated fats – vegetable oils, such as rapeseed and olive oils, and nuts, seeds and avocados are good sources.

Switch to wholegrain foods, like bread and pasta, and eat at least five portions of fruit and veg a day.

Choose healthy sources of protein, such as low-fat dairy foods, and chicken, beans, fish, nuts and seeds instead of red meat. If red meat is eaten, go for lean meat. Try and eat two portions of fish a week, with at least one being oily, like salmon, sardines and mackerel.

Eat fewer processed foods as these can be high in saturated fat, and choose foods fortified with sterols and stanols, as these can help to reduce your cholesterol.

2. Get active

Heart UK says exercise can help raise HDL levels and lower nonheart HDL, as well as helping you lose weight or stay a healthy weight.

The NHS recommends adults aim to do at least 150 minutes of moderate intensity activity or 75 minutes of intense activity every week.

3. Stop smoking

Heart UK says smoking makes nonHDL cholesterol 'stickier', so it clings to artery walls and clogs them up, and it lowers levels of 'good' HDL cholesterol. Smoking also damages artery walls, and cholesterol collects in the damaged areas.

4. Take medication like statins

Lifestyle changes alone may not be enough and you may be prescribed medication, usually statins, which Heart UK says can reduce your nonHDL cholesterol by 30%-50%.