

How to change your diet to lower cholesterol

Why getting enough of the 'good' type is just as important as avoiding the 'bad' type

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Cholesterol often gets a bad rap, but it is a substance in our bodies that we need for a variety of functions including the formation of sex hormones (testosterone, oestrogen, progesterone); steroid hormones (cortisol, adrenaline) and a precursor to bile production, which helps your body to absorb fat-soluble vitamins (A, D, E & K).



While one type of cholesterol is typically considered “good” – HDL (high-density lipoprotein), which helps to transport LDL away from the arteries – lead recipe developer and dietitian at Equalution, Greer Calabro, says that there is another type typically considered the opposite and this “bad” cholesterol – LDL (low density lipoprotein) – can cause blockages and hardening of the arteries.

“High cholesterol can cause a build-up of fat in your arteries, making it difficult for blood to flow freely through to your heart,” Calabro says. “A person with high cholesterol is at increased risk of developing cardiovascular disease (CVD) as well as secondary diseases like nonalcoholic fatty liver disease and Type 2 diabetes.”

WHAT IS CONSIDERED A HIGH LEVEL OF CHOLESTEROL?

Calabro says that a total cholesterol reading above 5.5mmol/L, HDL above 2.1 mmol/L, LDL above 1.7 mmol/L is considered a high level.

While some risk factors such as a diet high in saturated fats and processed foods, being overweight, having a sedentary lifestyle, smoking and age can increase the likelihood of developing high cholesterol, establishing whether you have a high level can be difficult to tell as there are no symptoms.

Official diagnosis can be done by your GP via a blood test.

However, as they say, prevention is the best medicine, so along with ensuring you are exercising regularly, diet plays a key role in keeping your cholesterol levels in a healthy range, says Calabro.

THE BEST CHOLESTEROL-LOWERING FOODS

Cholesterol-lowering superfoods can also work wonders for your diet, says Calabro, particularly those containing soluble fibre (think rolled oats, pulses, barley and psyllium along with tomatoes, flaxseeds and almonds).

The Heart Foundation also recommends eating fish two to three times a week and choosing unflavoured milk, yoghurt and cheese. People with high cholesterol or heart disease should opt for reduced fat options. Check the labels to make sure there's no added sugar. Non-dairy milks and yoghurts are OK too – opt for versions that have no added sugar and have had calcium added. Finally, don't forget, you are not just what you eat but drink, too, and while water is the all-round champion of healthy drinking, there are other options you can enjoy such as tea or unflavoured milk.