

**Patient education: Can foods or supplements lower cholesterol? (The Basics)**

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

Can I lower my cholesterol by changing my diet? — Yes, you can lower your cholesterol some if you avoid red meat, butter, fried foods, cheese, and other foods that have a lot of saturated fat. Other things that might help lower cholesterol include:

- Eating more soluble fiber – Soluble fiber is found in fruits, oats, barley, beans, and peas.
- A vegan diet – A vegan diet contains no animal products, such as meat, eggs, or milk.

But if you are interested in improving your health, it's best not to focus just on cholesterol. There are changes you can make to your diet that will reduce your risk of heart disease and other problems—even if they don't lower your cholesterol much.

No single diet is right for everyone. But in general, a healthy diet can include:

- Lots of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains (examples of whole grains include whole wheat, oats, and barley)
- Some beans, peas, lentils, chickpeas, and similar foods
- Some nuts, such as walnuts, almonds, and peanuts
- Some milk and milk products
- Some fish

To have a healthy diet, it's also important to limit or avoid sugar, sweets, and refined grains. (Refined grains are found in white bread, white rice, most forms of pasta, and most packaged "snack" foods.)

What about eggs? — Eggs are OK, but don't overdo it. The news often has stories about the health benefits or risks of eggs. The truth is, eggs are a good source of protein and do not raise cholesterol much.

Are there specific foods that can lower my cholesterol? — Maybe. There are some foods that seem to lower cholesterol, but scientists are still not sure. Here are some foods that are being studied:

- **Foods rich in omega-3 fatty acids** – Foods rich in omega-3 fatty acids include oily fish, and olive and canola oil. These foods seem to raise good cholesterol and might lower certain types of bad cholesterol. More important, studies show that people who eat lots of these foods are less likely than those who eat less of them to have heart disease. If you want, it's fine to eat 1 to 2 servings of oily fish a week (such as salmon, herring, or tuna). If you would like to take fish oil supplements, talk to your doctor or nurse.
- **Nuts** – Some studies show that eating certain nuts, such as walnuts and pistachios, can help lower cholesterol and even the risk of heart attack or death.
- **Fiber-rich foods** – Fiber-rich foods, such as fruits, vegetables, beans, and oats, seem to lower cholesterol and are generally good for your health. Some doctors even recommend fiber supplements.

What about designer foods that claim to lower cholesterol? — Be careful with these foods. There are now many foods that have added plant extracts called "sterols" or "stanols." Examples include Minute Maid HeartWise orange juice, Danacol yogurt, and special margarines such as Benecol and Promise Activ. Foods with added sterols or stanols can lower cholesterol. But it's not clear whether those foods help reduce the risk of heart attack or stroke. Plus, research in animals shows that these extracts might actually cause health problems. Experts think more research is needed before they can recommend that people eat foods with added plant sterols or stanols.

Should I take supplements to lower my cholesterol? — Maybe. Some research has shown that certain supplements can lower cholesterol. But there is almost no research showing that supplements can help prevent heart attacks, strokes, or any of the problems caused by high cholesterol. If you decide to try supplements, keep in mind that in the United States, the government does not regulate supplements very well. That means that what's on a supplement's label is not always actually in the bottle.

Here are some supplements that might help with cholesterol:

- **Red yeast rice** – This supplement can contain the same ingredient that is in a prescription medicine to lower cholesterol. Red yeast rice helps lower cholesterol, but the products that claim to have it might not always have much of the active ingredient.
- **Calcium** – Some studies show that calcium supplements can lower cholesterol. But there are no studies showing that they lower the risk of heart attack or stroke. Some studies even suggest that calcium supplements can increase these risks.

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