Cholesterol Facts

What Foods Influence my Blood Cholesterol Levels?

We are all interested in improving our health but there is still a great deal of confusion about the role of cholesterol in our diets and in our bodies. We know that having a high blood cholesterol level is bad for our heart, but how does dietary cholesterol affect blood cholesterol?

This fact sheet will explore well-proven strategies for lowering blood cholesterol levels to help improve the heart health of the nation.*

What is Cholesterol?

In the body - Cholesterol is a waxy substance that is essential within the body for the normal function of our cells. Cholesterol provides a major component of the sheaths (covers) that insulate our nerves, as well as being the starting point for many hormones. Cholesterol also plays a vital role in the way we digest fat. The liver produces most of the cholesterol in our bodies, although many tissues produce their own.

In food - Cholesterol appears exclusively in animal products and is found in a number of foods, such as shellfish, eggs, liver, kidney, meat, dairy products and poultry.

Lowering Blood Cholesterol

Since the 1980s research has consistently shown that the amount of saturates in the diet is a major influence on blood cholesterol levels. The level of cholesterol in the diet is no longer considered a priority when trying to reduce blood cholesterol levels. The section in the next column on 'Foods to avoid when reducing blood cholesterol levels' gives examples of foods high in saturates.

Foods to Help Lower Blood Cholesterol Levels

Evidence shows that some foods can actively lower blood cholesterol. However, keeping a healthy shape, weight and being physically active is just as important and will also influence your blood cholesterol in a positive way.

Eating a balanced diet plus the foods listed below may help to improve your blood cholesterol and general heart health:

1. **Eat more:**
   - wholegrains and foods high in soluble fibre such as pulses, oats, fruits and vegetables
   - oily fish such as salmon, mackerel, sardines.

2. **Swap to healthier fats/oils, but use sparingly**, such as rapeseed or olive oil.

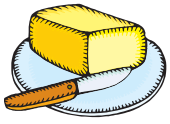
3. If you are still struggling to lower your cholesterol level and/or have a strong family history of heart disease, you may want to consider a food fortified with Stanols/ Sterols such as spreads and yogurts (follow manufacturer's instructions).

Foods to Avoid When Reducing Blood Cholesterol Levels

There are certain foods that are high in saturates to avoid, or limit, in your diet to help reduce your blood cholesterol levels.

These include:

- Pies and pastries
- Sausages
- Butter
- Ghee
- Lard / dripping
- Cakes and biscuits made with butter, lard or other saturated fat or hydrogenated vegetable oil
- Hard cheeses
- Cream



Official Recommendation

In line with the most recent evidence available, the UK Food Standards Agency advises that cholesterol-containing foods, like eggs and shellfish, need not be restricted if you follow a healthy, balanced diet that is low in saturates and includes a good mixture of foods from all the major food groups.

Many cholesterol-containing foods are relatively low in saturates and contain other useful nutrients such as: protein, iron, zinc, vitamin D, vitamin E and calcium.

The British Dietetic Association advises that if you are eating a balanced diet, you only need to cut down on eggs, or other cholesterol-containing foods, if you have been told to do so by your GP or registered dietitian.

Conclusion

Although there are many factors that affect blood cholesterol levels, the easiest way to reduce it in your diet is to cut down on foods high in saturates, keep to a healthy weight and shape and be physically active. Make sure your daily diet contains good levels of starchy carbohydrates, especially wholegrains, at least five portions of fruit and vegetables, low-fat dairy foods and lean cuts of meat and fish as well as eggs, nuts and pulses.

*Reducing blood cholesterol is only one modifiable risk factor in reducing heart disease and needs to be considered in the context of other risk factors. Specialist dietary advice should be given to those with inherited disorders. For more information, please refer to the BDA fact sheets on:

- Eating for a Healthy Heart
- Getting the Balance Right
- Fat - Getting the Balance Right
- Omega-3 Fatty Acids - Fishing for Facts
- The Truth About Trans Fats
- Wholegrains - The Way To Go