



American  
Heart  
Association.

ANSWERS  
by heart



Lifestyle + Risk Reduction  
Cholesterol

## How Can I Improve My Cholesterol?

Most heart and blood vessel disease is caused by a buildup of cholesterol, plaque and other fatty deposits in artery walls. The arteries that feed the heart can become so clogged the blood flow is reduced, causing chest pain. If a blood clot forms and blocks the artery, a heart attack can occur. If a blood clot blocks an artery leading to or in the brain, a stroke results.

You can make lifestyle changes to improve your cholesterol. You can eat heart-healthy foods, reach and maintain a healthy weight, be physically active and not smoke. Some people also need to take medicine.

Your doctor can help you create a plan to improve your cholesterol. It's important to follow your plan and discuss any concerns you have with your doctor.



Cholesterol can join with fats and other substances in your blood to build up in the inner walls of your arteries. The arteries can become clogged and narrow, and blood flow is reduced.

### What should I eat?

Focus on foods low in saturated and trans fats such as:

- A variety of fruits and vegetables.
- A variety of whole grain foods such as whole-grain bread, cereal, pasta and brown rice. At least half of the servings should be whole grains.
- Fat-free, 1% and low-fat milk products.
- Skinless poultry and lean meats. When you choose to eat red meat and pork, select options labeled "loin" and "round." These cuts usually have the least amount of fat.
- Fatty fish such as salmon, trout, albacore tuna and sardines. Enjoy at least 8 ounces of non-fried fish each week.
- Unsalted nuts, seeds, and legumes (dried beans or peas).
- Nontropical vegetable oils like canola, corn, olive, or safflower oils.

### What should I limit?

- Foods with a lot of sodium (salt)
- Sweets and sugar-sweetened beverages
- Red meats and fatty meats that aren't trimmed
- Processed meats such as bologna, salami and sausage
- Full-fat dairy products such as whole milk, cream, ice cream, butter and cheese
- Baked goods made with saturated and trans fats such as donuts, cakes and cookies
- Foods that list the words "hydrogenated oils" in the ingredients panel
- Saturated oils like coconut oil, palm oil and palm kernel oil
- Solid fats like shortening, stick margarine and lard
- Fried foods

(continued)



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### What are some cooking tips?

- Add a variety of fruits and vegetables to your meals.
- Use a rack to drain off fat when you broil, roast or bake poultry and meats.
- Look for leaner cuts if you choose to eat meat.
- Don't baste with drippings; use wine, fruit juice or marinade.
- Broil or grill instead of pan-frying.
- Cut off all visible fat from meat before cooking.
- Remove the skin from poultry.
- Use a vegetable oil spray to brown or sauté foods.
- Serve smaller portions of higher-calorie dishes.
- Use low-fat, low-sodium options instead of regular cheese.



### HOW CAN I LEARN MORE?

- 1 Call 1-800-AHA-USA1 (1-800-242-8721), or visit [heart.org](https://heart.org) to learn more about heart disease and stroke.
- 2 Sign up for our monthly *Heart Insight* e-news for heart patients and their families, at [HeartInsight.org](https://HeartInsight.org).
- 3 Connect with others sharing similar journeys with heart disease and stroke by joining our Support Network at [heart.org/SupportNetwork](https://heart.org/SupportNetwork).

#### Do you have questions for your doctor or nurse?

Take a few minutes to write down your questions for the next time you see your health care professional.

For example:

**What about eating out?**

**Why are weight control and physical activity important?**

#### MY QUESTIONS:

We have many other fact sheets to help you make healthier choices to reduce your risk, manage your condition or care for a loved one. Visit [heart.org/AnswersByHeart](https://heart.org/AnswersByHeart) to learn more.