



Managing your cholesterol

Cholesterol is a soft, fat-like substance in your blood and in the cells in your body. Your body naturally produces all the cholesterol you need, so you don't need to eat foods that contain it. Too much saturated fat and cholesterol in your diet can cause a fatty plaque build-up in your arteries, obstructing blood flow to your heart and putting you at greater risk for heart disease. Heart disease is one of the most serious complications of diabetes, and it accounts for the majority of diabetes-related deaths. By lowering your blood cholesterol levels, you can reduce your risk of a heart attack or prevent heart disease from getting worse.

Unfortunately, high cholesterol has no symptoms. The only way to find out your risk for sure is to have a blood test, usually done after a 12-hour fast from foods and liquids. The American Diabetes Association recommends that doctors measure total cholesterol, low-density lipids (LDL), high density lipids (HDL) cholesterol and triglycerides in adults with diabetes at least once a year.

What does it all mean?

The recommended goals for blood lipids are:

- Triglyceride levels less than 150 mg/dL
- Total cholesterol less than 200 mg/dL
- LDL cholesterol below 100 mg/dL. (Please check with your doctor about the best level for you.)
- HDL cholesterol greater than 50 mg/dl in women and 40 mg/dL in men.

High levels of triglycerides increase your risk of a heart attack or stroke. Additionally, the LDL cholesterol is more useful than total cholesterol for telling whether someone has unhealthy fat levels. When LDL cholesterol levels are 100 mg/dl or higher it is best to take action. Generally, lifestyle changes, such as losing weight, becoming more active and improving diet are the first steps.

If your LDL cholesterol level is still too high, or if you already have heart disease, your doctor may prescribe cholesterol-lowering medicines. These medicines, in addition to weight loss, diet changes and increased activity, will help you effectively lower your cholesterol levels.



Lower your cholesterol with a healthy meal plan

Following a healthy diet is one of the best things you can do for your diabetes and heart health. Your dietitian can help design a meal plan to improve your cholesterol levels. Visits to a dietitian are a BCN covered benefit with a referral from your primary care physician. A healthy meal plan for lowering cholesterol levels should include:

- Limiting your intake of saturated fats (found mostly in meat, milk and eggs) to less than 7 percent of calories.
- Decreasing cholesterol intake to less than 200 mg per day.
- Limiting trans fats (found in shortening, packaged foods and many margarines).
- Keeping total fat intake between 25 and 35 percent of calories.
- Eating more fiber. Total fiber should add up to 20 to 30 grams a day.
- Adding plant stanols and sterols to your diet. These are found in cholesterol-lowering spreads such as Benecol[®], Take Control[®], Smart Balance Plus[®] and in the dietary supplement Benecol SoftGels[®]. These can be found in most grocery stores.

Other changes in your eating habits may help you control your cholesterol levels, such as eating smaller, more frequent meals throughout the day, which research has linked to lower total and LDL cholesterol levels.

How exercise can help

Exercise helps keep blood sugar in control and prevents heart disease. It raises HDL cholesterol levels and lowers LDL cholesterol and triglyceride levels. It also strengthens the heart and counteracts stress, high blood pressure and obesity — all of which lead to heart disease.

People with diabetes should check with their doctors before starting an exercise program. Exercise affects blood glucose levels, so it's important to work with your doctor or diabetes educator to design a safe exercise plan.



According to the American Heart Association an exercise program should include:

- Aerobic activity, at least 30 minutes a day, or 30 to 60 minutes four to six times weekly. Activities can include bicycling, walking, jogging, swimming or other exercises that increase heart rate.
- Weight training two or three times a week for the arms, shoulders, chest, trunk, back, hips and legs.

Check with your health professionals to find out what's best for you.

Brought to you by Healthy Blue Living. Healthy Blue Living members who have questions about their health, specific conditions or other health concerns, can call BlueHealthConnection[®] at 800-637-2972.