

Facts About Blood Cholesterol

Guidelines For Heart-Healthy Living

Whatever your blood cholesterol level, you can make changes to help lower it or keep it low and reduce your risk for heart disease. These are guidelines for heart-healthy living that the whole family (including children ages 2 and above) can follow:

1) Choose Foods Low in Saturated Fat

All foods that contain fat are made up of a mixture of saturated and unsaturated fats. Saturated fat raises your blood cholesterol level more than anything else you eat. The best way to reduce blood cholesterol is to choose foods lower in saturated fat. One way to help your family do this is by choosing foods such as fruits, vegetables, and whole grains--foods naturally low in total fat and high in starch and fiber.

2) Choose Foods Low in Total Fat

Since many foods high in total fat are also high in saturated fat, eating foods low in total fat will help your family eat less saturated fat. When you do eat fat, substitute unsaturated fat--either polyunsaturated or monounsaturated--for saturated fat. Fat is a rich source of calories, so eating foods low in fat will also help you eat fewer calories. Eating fewer calories can help you lose weight--and, if you are overweight, losing weight is an important part of lowering your blood cholesterol. (Consult your family doctor if you have a concern about your child's weight.)

3) Choose Foods High in Starch and Fiber

Foods high in starch and fiber are excellent substitutes for foods high in saturated fat. These foods--breads, cereals, pasta, grains, fruits, and vegetables--are low in saturated fat and cholesterol. They are also lower in calories than foods that are high in fat. But limit fatty toppings and spreads like butter and sauces made with cream and whole milk dairy products. Foods high in starch and fiber are also good sources of vitamins and minerals.

When eaten as part of a diet low in saturated fat and cholesterol, foods with soluble fiber--like oat and barley bran and dry peas and beans--may help to lower blood cholesterol.

4) Choose Foods Low in Cholesterol

Remember, dietary cholesterol can raise blood cholesterol, although usually not as much as saturated fat. So it's important for your family to choose foods low in dietary cholesterol. Dietary cholesterol is found only in foods that come from animals. And even if an animal food is low in saturated fat, it may be high in cholesterol; for instance, organ meats like liver and egg yolks are low in saturated fat but high in cholesterol. Egg whites and foods from plant sources do not have cholesterol.

5) Be More Physically Active

Being physically active helps improve blood cholesterol levels: it can raise HDL and lower LDL. Being more active also can help you lose weight, lower your blood pressure, improve the fitness of your heart and blood vessels, and reduce stress. And being active together is great for the entire family.

6) Maintain a Healthy Weight, and Lose Weight If You Are Overweight

People who are overweight tend to have higher blood cholesterol levels than people of a healthy weight. Overweight adults with an "apple" shape--bigger (pot) belly--tend to have a higher risk for heart disease than those with a "pear" shape--bigger hips and thighs.

Whatever your body shape, when you cut the fat in your diet, you cut down on the richest source of calories. A family eating pattern high in starch and fiber instead of fat is a good way to help control weight. Do not go on crash diets that are very low in calories since they can be harmful to your health. If you are overweight, losing even a little weight can help to lower LDL-cholesterol and raise HDL-cholesterol.