

15 Surprising Ways to Improve Your Cholesterol

By Bill Phillips and the Editors of Men's Health
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Here are 15 ways to raise your HDL or lower your LDL (the bad cholesterol) today.

1. Eat more nuts. In an analysis of 25 different studies on walnuts, pecans, almonds, peanuts, pistachios, and macadamia nuts, researchers at Loma Linda University found that eating 67 grams of nuts per day—that's a little more than two ounces—increased the ratio of HDL to LDL in the blood by 8.3 percent. And Australian scientists found that when men replaced 15 percent of their daily calorie intake with macadamia nuts—12 to 16 nuts a day—their HDL levels went up by 8 percent. Even better: You can eat nuts covered in chocolate or rolled in cocoa powder; a Japanese study found that the polyphenols in chocolate activate genes that increase HDL production.
2. Boost your endurance. Researchers in Japan found that exercising for 20 minutes a day increases your HDL by 2.5 points. That's not much, but for every additional 10 minutes per day you keep huffing in the gym, you add an extra 1.4 points to your HDL. It doesn't matter whether you pull a rowing machine or power through a tough barbell routine, just keep your activity level at a point where you're panting but not out of breath.
3. Build killer quads. Ohio University researchers discovered that men who did lower-body work—squats, leg extensions, leg presses—twice a week for 16 weeks raised their HDL levels by 19 percent. For legs and HDL levels that are something to look at, follow the lead of the men in the study: Do three sets of six to eight repetitions of the half squat, leg extension, and leg press, resting no more than 2 minutes between sets. Use a weight that's about 85 percent of the amount you can lift just once.
4. Pop a milk pill. In a study published in the American Journal of Medicine, people who took a daily 1,000-mg calcium supplement saw their HDL-cholesterol levels rise by 7 percent. Choose a brand that contains calcium citrate (not coral calcium) and 400 international units of vitamin D for maximum absorption.
5. Make a date with Mrs. Paul. When Canadian researchers compared a steady diet of whitefish with regular consumption of lean beef and chicken, they found that the fish-eating folks experienced a 26 percent increase in HDL₂, a particularly protective form of HDL. Remember: Fish sticks aren't health food—unless they're baked, like Healthy Selects Sticks from Mrs. Paul's.
6. Learn how to pronounce “policosanol” (poly-CO-sanol). This mixture of alcohols derived from sugarcane wax is the rare natural supplement that may actually live up to its hype. Doses of 10 to 20 mg a day can increase HDL by up to 15 percent, according to David Maron, M.D., a cardiologist at Vanderbilt University medical center. Two brands to try: Naturals and Nature's Life, both sold at health-food stores.
7. Drink cranberry juice. University of Scranton scientists found that volunteers who drank three 8-ounce glasses a day for a month increased their HDL-cholesterol levels by 10 percent, enough to cut heart-disease risk by almost 40 percent. Buy 100 percent juice that's at least 27 percent cranberry.
8. Eat grapefruit. One a day can reduce arterial narrowing by 46 percent, lower your LDL cholesterol by more than 10 percent, and help drop your blood pressure by more than 5 points.

9. Don't let your tank hit empty. A study in the British Medical Journal found that people who eat six or more small meals a day have 5 percent lower LDL cholesterol levels than those who eat one or two large meals. That's enough to shrink your risk of heart disease by 10 to 20 percent.

10. Eat oatmeal cookies. In a University of Connecticut study, men with high LDL cholesterol (above 200 mg/dL) who ate oat-bran cookies daily for 8 weeks dropped their levels by more than 20 percent.

11. Switch your spread. Buy trans fat-free margarine, such as Smart Balance Buttery Spread. Researchers in Norway found that, compared with butter, no-trans margarine lowered LDL cholesterol by 11 percent.

12. Take the Concord. University of California researchers found that compounds in Concord grapes help slow the formation of artery-clogging LDL cholesterol. The grapes also lower blood pressure by an average of 6 points if you drink just 12 ounces of their juice a day.

13. Swallow phytosterols or phytosteranols. Both substances—derived from pine trees and soy—lower bad cholesterol levels by an average of 10 to 15 percent. Besides being available in supplements, the compounds are in cholesterol-lowering spreads like Benecol and Take Control.

14. Be a part-time vegetarian. Researchers in Toronto found that men who added a couple of servings of vegetarian fare such as whole grains, nuts, and beans to their diets each day for a month lowered their LDL cholesterol by nearly 30 percent.

15. Switch to dark chocolate. Finish researchers found that consuming 2.5 ounces of dark chocolate each day boosts levels of HDL by between 11 and 14 percent.

One final tip: Your heart will benefit more from a few long-term health improvements than from a flurry of activity followed by a return to the dangerous norm. Above are the tools to protect yourself. Work five of them into your daily routine over the next month. When they become second nature, try five more. By year's end, you will have given your heart a beating chance.