

Jeni's Health & Fitness Tips

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Hi Everyone!

Do you know your cholesterol level? If it has been a while since you had your level tested then it would be a good idea to get it checked. Cholesterol is checked by taking a blood sample after a 12 hour fast. The results will show levels of LDL & HDL cholesterol, triglycerides and total cholesterol in the blood.

Cholesterol is a type of fat required for good health and is a normal component of most body tissues. It is transported through the blood in lipoproteins. There are two types of lipoproteins; high density (HDL) and low density (LDL). High levels of LDL cholesterol can lead to fatty deposits in the artery walls causing atherosclerosis (hardening of the arteries). This increases the risk of heart disease and stroke. On the other hand, HDL cholesterol helps remove excess cholesterol from the arteries therefore decreasing the risks associated with high LDL levels.

High cholesterol levels have no symptoms. They are not a disease but an indicator of your risk of heart disease. Often one is totally unaware that they are at risk until they develop symptoms of heart disease. High production of cholesterol by the liver may also contribute to the development of gallstones. Your cholesterol reading should be considered in a holistic context, taking into account family history, blood pressure and your level of physical activity. Cholesterol levels generally rise during pregnancy and fall after a heart attack for around 3 months. Levels are also affected by diabetes, kidney disease, age, weight, under active thyroid gland and decreased metabolism. Hence there is no "one size fits all" recommended level for everyone.

Recently, I have found a large number of older adults attending my classes who are taking cholesterol lowering medication. When I ask what they are doing about reducing their cholesterol level, the answer is often "there is nothing I can do, it's hereditary". According to my research, only one person in 500 has familial hypercholesterolaemia (inherited high cholesterol levels). And yet, one in two tell me this is their problem, and they sincerely believe this. It is as if they feel better if they are not responsible for taking preventative action to avoid health risks. Perhaps they have been poorly advised by their health professional to discourage them from taking steps towards controlling the problem themselves. Some medical practitioners may feel it is safer to offer a pill than try and get the patient to change their diet and lifestyle.

So, if your LDL cholesterol level is too high, what can you do to help lower it?

- **Avoid animal fats.** There are two types of foods, plant based and animal based. It is possible to live a healthy life on a plant based diet. If you choose to eat animal based foods, keep them to a minimal. Watch out for hidden sources of animal fats in pastries, pies, cakes, biscuits. Read the ingredients in processed foods and consider the source of that food.
- **Get plenty of exercise.** At least half an hour each day of cardio vascular (aerobic) exercise.
- **Maintain a healthy weight.** If you are overweight you probably have excess LDL cholesterol.
- **Don't Smoke.**
- **Drink red wine in moderation.** Be careful, excess alcohol will give you the opposite effect.

To raise your HDL cholesterol level you can:

- **Eat grapes or drink fresh grape juice or cranberry juice.** According to a study of Boston University School of Medicine this can significantly raise HDL levels.
- **Choose foods high in niacin** (vitamin B3). Niacin can raise HDLs by 8% in three months. Foods rich in niacin include almonds, seeds, wheat products, beans, rice bran, leafy green vegetables, carrots, turnips and celery.
- **Reduce the amount of refined sugars and carbohydrates** in your diet.
- **Eat Macadamia nuts.** University of Newcastle study showed this can raise HDL by 8%.
- **Avoid trans fats.** Found in margarine, fast fried foods, cake mixes, some packaged breakfast cereals, biscuits, donuts, pastry, potato and corn chips, crackers and many more. Check the labels on packaged foods for "hydrogenated oil" and don't let the claim "0% trans fat" fool you. This means that a recommended serving (usually much smaller than a realistic serving) can contain less than 0.5 grams of trans fats. Choice magazine did a study on foods containing trans fats. Among the top 10 foods with the highest readings were Hungry Jack's whopper & regular fries, Pampas shortcrust pastry, McDonald's McNuggets, Big Macs & fries, Sargents party sausage rolls, Four n' Twenty traditional meat pie, Sara Lee snack quiche Lorraine and Nutella hazelnut spread.
- **Use curry.** The spice turmeric (found in curry powder) has been shown to increase HDL by 29% in one study. Turmeric can be added to many savory dishes and will give it a yellow colour.
- **Eat raw yellow or white onions.** One study showed an increase in HDL by 30%.

Most importantly, if your doctor has prescribed cholesterol lowering drugs – keep taking them. Your doctor has done this because he or she feels your cholesterol level is dangerously high. But consider some of the above changes you can make. In the long term, your cholesterol reading may fall to a level deemed safe by your doctor and he or she will be happy for you to discontinue medication. Take responsibility for your health and enjoy the benefits of increased energy and wellbeing.

Yours in health,

Jeni