

Cholesterol-Savvy Moves to Help Protect Your Heart

When it comes to heart health, keeping an eye on your cholesterol levels is key. Unfortunately, many people remain confused about what's bad, what's good and what heart-protective actions to take. Reena Patel, MD, and Minisha Kochar, MD, UCLA cardiologists in Torrance and Redondo Beach, cut through the cholesterol confusion.



Know your risk.

The American College of Cardiology (ACC) and the American Heart Association (AHA) have guidelines to calculate a person's 10-year and lifetime risk of heart attacks and strokes, referred to as atherosclerotic cardiovascular disease (ASCVD) or atherosclerosis. "We've shifted from a numbers game focused on good and bad cholesterol levels to treating an individual's overall cardiovascular risk," Dr. Patel says. In addition to cholesterol, the calculator also takes into consideration factors such as age, gender, race, tobacco use, diabetes and blood pressure. You can assess your risk online or via the ASCVD Risk Estimator app.

Consider medication.

The risk calculator helps doctors identify those who might benefit the most from cholesterol-lowering medications known as statins. Studies suggest that these medications lower heart attack risk by as

much as 36 percent. "We carefully monitor for side effects, which are rare, adjusting medication dosage and frequency as needed," Dr. Kochar says. "Some patients experience less muscle complaints when they take a supplement called Coenzyme Q10 (CoQ10)."

Move more.

Exercise is the best way to raise high-density lipoprotein, or HDL. This good cholesterol clears out low-density lipoprotein (LDL), the bad cholesterol that clogs arteries. To improve cholesterol levels, the AHA recommends 30 minutes of moderate physical activity five days a week. "I tell patients to set reachable goals, such as swapping out a 30-minute television show for a walk around the block," Dr. Patel says. In addition to boosting HDL, exercise also aids weight loss. Excess weight, especially a waist circumference of more than 40 inches for men or more than 35 inches for women, increases your likelihood of diabetes, another major heart disease risk factor.

Switch up your diet.

The foods you eat play a big role in your cholesterol numbers. Foods high in trans fats and saturated fats raise bad cholesterol, clogging arteries. Saturated fats are found in red meats and full-fat dairy products; trans fats are found in fried foods and snack products like cookies and crackers. In addition to cutting back on these foods, Dr. Kochar recommends adding more fresh vegetables and fruits to your diet, as well as eating more foods high in heart-protecting omega-3 fatty acids, such as salmon, almonds and flaxseed.

Talk to your doctor.

"Too often, people choose to forego medication in favor of lifestyle changes, but you jeopardize your health if those changes don't happen," says Cody Dashiell-Earp, MD, associate medical director of quality for the UCLA Department of Medicine. To help you succeed in making changes, or to determine your next steps, UCLA Health's new Healthy U preventive initiative reaches out to patients at high risk for heart problems. "You might get a phone call or a message via my.UCLAhealth.org if a Healthy U staff member thinks you could benefit from a heart health discussion with your primary-care doctor," Dr. Dashiell-Earp says.



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