

4 Weeks to Lower Cholesterol

TACKLE THIS HEART DISEASE RISK FACTOR ONE HEALTHY HABIT AT A TIME

A lot can happen in four weeks. The moon will complete a rotation around Earth. A newborn will start to lift his head. And you can transform your unhealthy habits into a cholesterol-lowering, heart-saving routine.

In fact, almost anyone can lower his or her cholesterol level through lifestyle changes, even if you struggle because of genetic factors and require medication, says Nieca Goldberg, M.D., a spokeswoman for the American Heart Association (AHA) and author of the *Complete Guide to Women's Health* (Ballantine Books, 2008).

CHOLESTEROL DEFINED

First, it's important to understand that not all cholesterol is bad. The cholesterol your doctor wants you to lower is called low-density lipoprotein, or LDL. An LDL buildup in your arteries can make them less flexible and block blood flow to your heart. The AHA recommends LDL levels be less than 100 mg/dL for those who have heart disease or diabetes and less than 160 mg/dL for people who don't have these diseases and are at low risk.

High-density lipoprotein (HDL), on the other hand, is the "good" cholesterol, which helps remove the bad cholesterol from arteries.

Ready to lower your LDL cholesterol level? Just follow this four-week guide, and you'll be off to a great start.

WEEK 1: STOP SMOKING

A lingering smoking habit could be lowering your good cholesterol level—not to mention increasing your risk for heart disease and several types of cancer. Plus, the AHA reminds us that smokers may find physical activity, a heart-health necessity, more challenging.

Your physician has likely urged you to quit, so if you haven't been heeding that advice, now is the time. To find the resources you need to kick the habit for good, talk to your doctor or visit smokefree.gov.

Don't smoke? Good for you. Start at Week 2.

106 MILLION

More than 106 million adults in the U.S. have high-risk or borderline high-risk cholesterol levels, according to the American Heart Association.



WEEK 2: CUT OUT BAD FOODS

To lower LDL cholesterol, cut out unhealthy foods.

“Animal fat is the biggest no-no,” says James W. Anderson, M.D., chair of the National Fiber Council. “Avoid eggs, butter and cheese.”

“And no trans fats,” Goldberg adds. Trans fats, which also masquerade under the name “partially hydrogenated oils” on food labels, are often found in fried foods and commercial baked goods, such as doughnuts, cookies and cakes.

The AHA advises keeping your fat intake between 25 percent and 35 percent of the total calories in your daily diet; of that, saturated fat should be less than 7 percent and trans fat less than 1 percent.

WEEK 3: ADD HEALTHY FOODS

Well done! You’ve taken important steps to eliminate unhealthy foods in your diet. Now it’s time to add foods high in nutritional value.

Anderson advocates a high-fiber diet. Start with oatmeal for breakfast, eat plenty of fruits and vegetables, and try to incorporate more beans, soy protein, and whole-grain rice and pasta.

In addition, Goldberg recommends eating fish such as salmon, mackerel or tuna a few times a week for its healthy omega-3 fatty acids and a handful of nuts like almonds every couple of days.



WEEK 4: START MOVING

Now that your diet is under control, it’s time to add exercise, which has been shown to help increase HDL levels. Plus, it lowers your chances for other risk factors for heart disease, like excess weight, diabetes and high blood pressure.

Goldberg recommends aerobic exercise in which you move large muscle groups, such as in activities like dancing, running or cycling. The AHA advises at least 30 minutes of moderate to vigorous exercise daily.

Congratulations! You’ve taken important steps to improving your cholesterol levels and lowering your risk for heart disease. Schedule your next screening for about eight to 12 weeks from now, to show your doctor—and yourself!—what you’ve accomplished.—*By Stephanie Conner*



WHAT’S YOUR CHOLESTEROL IQ?

Are you a cholesterol wiz? Find out by visiting the American Heart Association online. Go to americanheart.org and search “Cholesterol IQ.”



KEEP IT UP!

Now that the four weeks are up, your focus should be on keeping the momentum going. As Nieca Goldberg, M.D., a spokeswoman for the American Heart Association, explains, it might be three to four months before you see changes in your cholesterol levels. Plus, you want to maintain your health for years to come. Here are a few tips for staying on track:

- ▶ **Remember the benefits.** You’ve worked hard to reduce your chances of heart disease so that you can live a long life and be there for your family. Keep those goals in mind.
- ▶ **Don’t be too strict.** Don’t give up everything you love. An occasional cookie or hamburger is OK. Focus on moderation with special treats.
- ▶ **Schedule regular screenings.** Keep yourself accountable by having your cholesterol levels checked.