

Hey, I'm Mustafa—a medical student in Tennessee who wants the best for your health, genuinely.

Now, you've been told you have high cholesterol. That sucks...

High cholesterol can lead to a buildup of fatty deposits or “gunk” in your arteries, which can restrict blood flow and increase your risk for heart attacks (where your heart isn't getting good blood flow), strokes (where your brain is also not getting enough blood flow), and other serious health issues.

I don't share this to scare you—I share it so you have the facts. **The absolute best part of this news?** You have the power to change it!! You can lower your cholesterol, and this guide is here to show you exactly how.

Read the following educational pamphlet by the American Heart Association to begin our understanding of how to control your cholesterol: [click me](#).

“How bad” your cholesterol is can be seen in the numbers on your blood test. There's 4 main values we care about: **LDL-C, HDL-C, Triglycerides, and Total Cholesterol**

- **LDL cholesterol** is the bad cholesterol that clogs your arteries
- **HDL cholesterol** is the good cholesterol that cleans up your arteries
- **Triglycerides** are how extra calories are stored in your body, and

High triglycerides make your "bad" LDL stickier and destroy your "good" HDL

- **Total cholesterol** is less useful by itself because it combines all types of cholesterol (HDL, LDL, and VLDL).

So, for example, having a higher HDL could increase your total cholesterol, even though HDL is good. That's why we don't look at total cholesterol alone—we look at the individual numbers to understand the bigger picture.

Here's the healthy values you want:

Lab	The Number YOU WANT
LDL-C	<100mg/dL
HDL-C	≥60 mg/dL
Triglycerides	<150mg/dL
Total cholesterol	<200mg/dL

Now, here's how we're going to fix your numbers and **decrease your cholesterol.**

It starts with NUTRITION, what you eat.

The fat you eat is generally more important for your blood cholesterol levels than the cholesterol contained directly in the food. I know it's weird, but trust me it's true.

Saturated fat increases your LDL ("bad") cholesterol, and *trans* fat is even worse as it not only increases LDL, but it also decreases your HDL (good) cholesterol.

On the other hand, **unsaturated fat decreases your LDL cholesterol...**

...by keeping your liver running smoothly. You can think of your liver as a busy sorting facility; unsaturated fats are clean and easy to process, letting the liver stay proactive in extracting bad cholesterol from your bloodstream. Saturated fats, on the other hand, are heavy and hard to break down, which leaves your liver preoccupied with processing the fat itself. Because the liver's focus is turned away, it stops pulling cholesterol out of circulation, leaving that extra cholesterol floating in your blood for much longer.

We also need to pay attention to **fiber** as it **helps lower cholesterol**.

It binds to cholesterol-containing bile acids¹ in your digestive system and helps remove them from your body—so you lose cholesterol! Your liver then has to pull more cholesterol from your bloodstream to replace those bile acids, helping you, again, lower your LDL cholesterol (a double whammy!)

So while saturated and trans fat are pushing your cholesterol in the wrong direction, unsaturated fats and fiber help push it back in the right direction. And this foundational knowledge gives us 4 nutritional values to pay attention to when evaluating a food for its impact on cholesterol:

1. **Saturated fat**
2. **Unsaturated fat**
3. **Trans fat**
4. **Fiber**

Examples of Foods You Should NOT Eat:

Processed and Fatty Meats

- Saturated Fat: High
- Fiber: Zero / Very Low

Examples: bacon, sausage, hot dogs, pepperoni, and fatty cuts of beef (like ribeye)

Fun Fact: Animal products generally provide zero dietary fiber. Fiber comes naturally from plants.

Fast Food and Fried Foods

- Saturated Fat: High
- Fiber: Zero / Very Low
- Trans Fat: Yes, may contain some

Examples: hamburgers, fried chicken, French fries, and so many other deep-fried foods

Fun fact: There is no safe amount of trans fat!

¹ these are molecules that help you absorb food, only thing you need to understand is that they contain cholesterol

Butter, Cream, and Full-Fat Dairy

- Saturated Fat: High
- Fiber: Zero

Examples: ice cream, (cheesy) pizza, (creamy) fettuccini

Commercially Baked and Highly Processed Foods

- Saturated Fat: High
- Fiber: Zero / Very Low
- Trans Fat: Yes, may contain some

Examples: donuts, pastries, cakes, cookies, and packaged snack foods

Examples of Foods You Should Eat:

Now that you know what to limit, I want us to focus on what you should **add more of**. The goal isn't simply to remove unhealthy foods—it's to replace them with foods that actively help improve and decrease your cholesterol.

Beans, Lentils & Peas

- Saturated Fat: Low
- Fiber: High

Examples: black beans, kidney beans, chickpeas, lentils, and split peas.

Whole Grains

- Saturated Fat: Low
- Fiber: High

Examples: oatmeal, barley, brown rice, quinoa, and whole-grain bread.

Fruits

- Saturated Fat: Low
- Fiber: High

Examples: apples, berries, oranges, pears, and bananas.

Important: You want to choose whole fruit rather than juice to get the fiber!

Vegetables

- Saturated Fat: Low
- Fiber: High

Examples: broccoli, Brussels sprouts, carrots, spinach, peppers, and leafy greens.

Nuts & Seeds

- Saturated Fat: Low
- Fiber: High

Examples: almonds, walnuts, pistachios, chia seeds, and flaxseeds.

Important: Nuts and seeds are high in unsaturated fats—the “healthier” types of fat. When unsaturated fats replace saturated fats in your diet, they can help lower LDL (“bad”) cholesterol and improve your overall cholesterol profile.

Fish

- Saturated Fat: present but low
- Unsaturated Fat: High (in fatty fish)
- Fiber: Zero

Examples: salmon, sardines, trout, and tuna.

Important: Fatty fish are rich in healthy unsaturated fats like omega-3 fatty acids—a fantastic replacement for fatty or processed meats because it has less saturated fat while giving you beneficial nutrients and healthy fats.

Unsaturated Plant Oils

- Saturated Fat: Low
- Unsaturated Fat: High
- Fiber: Zero

Examples: olive, canola, and avocado oils.

Important: *Butter, on the other hand, is much higher in saturated fat and should be avoided, so replacing it with these oils instead can improve your cholesterol!*

Now you have a general understanding of which foods increase saturated and trans fats and which have healthy fiber and unsaturated fats. With this, you can start to recognize which foods are probably going to **raise your harmful LDL cholesterol** and which can help lower it.

But, there is one more important piece of the food puzzle I haven't explained: **Triglycerides**.

1. What are they?

Triglycerides is how your body stores energy. When you eat more calories than your body needs, your body converts that extra energy into triglycerides, which are then stored in your fat.

2. Why do we care?

- They do something (a little complex) that makes LDL particles smaller and denser, which makes them more dangerous because they're more likely to enter the artery wall and cause plaque buildup.
- High triglycerides also increase clearing of HDL (good) cholesterol which is the guy who carries cholesterol away from the arteries for removal.

So, **chronically high triglycerides** can be a double whammy like trans-fats: they can **make your LDL more harmful while reducing the amount of protective HDL** in your blood.

One of the biggest contributors to increasing triglycerides is consistently consuming more calories than your body needs, particularly from added sugars and refined carbohydrates:

1. Foods and drinks like soda, sweet tea, candy, desserts, and other sugary foods
2. Refined carbohydrates like white bread and other highly processed grains (which means many of their nutrients and, importantly, their fiber has been stripped away)
3. Alcohol (significantly!)

Summary

Don't get overwhelmed trying to memorize everything I've said; instead, remember the basic principles:

Limit saturated and trans fats, because they raise your harmful LDL cholesterol, with trans fats being especially harmful. **Replace them with unsaturated fats** from foods like fish, nuts, seeds, and plant oils. **Eat plenty of fiber**, especially from beans, whole grains, fruits, and vegetables, because fiber helps lower LDL cholesterol. And finally, **keep added sugars, refined carbohydrates, excess calories, and alcohol in check**, because these can raise your triglycerides, which can make LDL more harmful and lower protective HDL.

After nutrition, which is the single strongest and most effective factor you can control, comes exercise!

Food gives us a lot of control over our LDL, but it doesn't have as much of an effect on HDL. That's where **exercise** comes in; it **can modestly raise HDL ("good") cholesterol** and is especially helpful for **lowering triglycerides** (while also slightly reducing LDL 😊)

Start with walking

Aim for at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity (cardio) per week. An easy way to do this is:

- **Brisk² walking:** 30 minutes, 5 days/week | equals 150min/wk

Walk fast enough that you're breathing harder, but you can still hold a conversation.

Your activity throughout the day counts too. You don't want to be sedentary, defined as <5,000 steps per day. So, track those steps using your iPhone or another means and aim to get 7,000 - 9,000 steps per day by walking around work, taking the stairs (as often as you can!), and so many more creative ways.

You also don't have to exercise every single day. **What matters most is getting enough activity throughout the week and staying consistent.**

Below are some more ideas but the general message is, **EXERCISE!**

1. Jogging/running
2. Cycling
3. Swimming
4. Stair climbing / elliptical

² moving, speaking, or happening in a quick, energetic, and active way

And don't forget resistance training...

2–3 days/week is also great for overall metabolic health. But it doesn't replace cardio—ideally, **combine both**.

If you'd like a personalized exercise routine, I can help you!

Book your free call here: [Click me](#)

And finally, two more things:

1. Don't smoke or use tobacco or nicotine.

Smoking damages the lining of your blood vessels and makes it easier for cholesterol and other substances to build up in your arteries. It also lowers HDL, increases inflammation, and makes your cholesterol-related cardiovascular risk even worse.

For current users, I know it's hard but, from everyone in the medical community, I beg you **don't smoke, don't use tobacco or nicotine.. PLEASE.**

2. Take medication if you need it.

Medication IS NOT defeat because the ultimate goal is to **protect your heart and blood vessels** by getting your cholesterol to a healthy level.

Lifestyle changes should always be part of the picture, and I advocate for them to the greatest of degrees, but sometimes they're not enough, and medication can help protect your health!!