

# Health Guide:

## Reducing your cholesterol



New Zealanders are renowned for our “she’ll be right” attitudes, and that’s especially true when it comes to thinking about cholesterol.

While we are generally aware that high cholesterol isn’t a good thing, it’s also not something we spend a lot of time thinking or worrying about (isn’t there enough of that, these days?)

For many Kiwis, cholesterol isn’t actually an issue. But for the approximately [one in four](#) who should be managing their cholesterol levels for their heart health, the “she’ll be right” attitude goes from a quirky cultural trait to something much more dangerous.

In this eBook, we’re taking a closer look at what cholesterol is, why it’s dangerous when there’s too much of it, and what you can do about it. We’ve also asked Gut Health Nutritionist Jess Wharton of [Key Nutrition](#) for an expert’s take on cholesterol dangers and management. Keep an eye out for her handy advice and knowledge throughout.

## What is cholesterol exactly?

Cholesterol is a fatty, waxy substance that lives in your blood.

It comes from the food you eat and from your liver, which makes it naturally. And the thing is – it’s not always bad.

The reason your liver makes cholesterol is because your body needs it for developing cells and hormones, and for digesting fats. It’s only a problem when we have cholesterol that’s surplus to our body’s requirements.

When that happens, cholesterol can 'stick' to the walls of your arteries and build up over time. This makes those arteries harder and more narrow, making it more difficult for blood to flow through them as it should.

The bad guy here is LDL – low density lipoprotein. This is the type of cholesterol carrier that builds up on your artery walls and causes all kinds of havoc.

But we have a good guy too, the superhero of our bloodstreams, HDL – high density lipoprotein cholesterol carrier. HDLs actively work to remove bad cholesterol from artery walls, helping to minimise the effects of the LDLs.

Unfortunately, it can be difficult to manage bad cholesterol, even with the help of good cholesterol. That's because aside from eating too much high-cholesterol food, some of us are genetically predisposed to have high cholesterol, some hormonal issues can cause it, and a number of other factors can lead to this issue as well, such as stress, age, lack of exercise, smoking, obesity, or alcohol intake.

That's why even those with a healthy, balanced diet brimming with healthy HDL cholesterol should take steps to learn about their cholesterol levels and manage it more actively if need be.

## What are the risks associated with high cholesterol?

High cholesterol is like a high score in golf – the opposite of what you're aiming for.

When you have high cholesterol, it can lead to fatty deposits developing in your blood vessels. This makes it harder for blood to flow through arteries, and if they break apart, they can also create blood clots, which may result in a stroke or heart attack.

More than [half of all New Zealanders](#) who are admitted to hospital with a heart attack have high cholesterol, highlighting just how dangerous this common health ailment can be.

Additionally, if you have high cholesterol and other risk factors such as high blood pressure, your risk of cardiovascular health events increases even further.

## What are the signs and symptoms of high cholesterol?

This is a trick question – there aren't any signs or symptoms of high cholesterol.

This is one of the reasons why it's so common and so dangerous. It doesn't announce itself with any kinds of pains, skin problems, or other health issues that usually crop up when your body is telling you something is wrong.

In fact, the only way to tell if you have high cholesterol is to have a blood test.



"High cholesterol generally has no symptoms, so many people are unaware that they even have it. That's why it's important for cholesterol levels to be checked regularly, a full lipid panel is a great way to get a gauge on where your levels are at. Your doctor will be able to order these for you," explains Jess.

So the next time you're visiting your doctor, you can ask for a blood test for high cholesterol. Even if you're young, fit, and healthy, you can still have cholesterol problems as some of us lose the genetic lottery and end up with higher cholesterol from the outset. Best case scenario, you'll walk away with the peace of mind that your cholesterol is just right. Worst case scenario, your doctor will discover that your cholesterol is on the high side, and chat to you about ways you can bring that number down to a healthier level.

## Lifestyle changes you can make to improve your cholesterol

Just as there are numerous things that can lead to high cholesterol, there are numerous ways to combat it.

Here are some of the key ways to improve yours.

### Regular exercise

Our [Ministry of Health](#) recommends at least 2.5 hours of moderate physical activity every week, or about half that if you're sweating up a storm in a boot camp or other vigorous physical activity.

Nutritionist Jess says that "a sedentary lifestyle is a no-no for heart disease risk." "Performing either medium-intensity

resistance exercise or high-intensity aerobic exercise increases your HDL levels. Exercise typically will help to support losing or maintaining weight, another reason this is a good habit to rehearse as you protect your heart," she explains.

Exercise helps to stimulate enzymes that move the bad LDL cholesterol from the blood and blood vessel walls, so your body can get rid of it. When you exercise more, your body gets rid of more bad cholesterol, making everything from a brisk walk to a marathon fantastic for your cholesterol levels.



## Healthy eating

Healthy eating can reduce your cholesterol in not just one, but two ways!

The first is by avoiding adding extra cholesterol to your blood. Sadly, this largely means cutting back on all the fun things, such as:

- chips
- anything deep fried
- cookies
- pastries
- cakes
- pies
- pizza (sorry)
- chocolate
- ice cream

But good news, foodies. You can also consume foods that boost your HDL (good cholesterol), which also helps to battle bad cholesterol.

Introduce more of the good guys to your diet with:

- high fibre foods
- wholegrain oats, breads, cereals etc
- vegetables (skin on is best)
- lean meats
- fish

Jess explains how these good guys are superheroes for our cholesterol levels.

"Increased fibre and plant sterols are found naturally in very small quantities in a variety of plant foods such as grains, vegetables, fruit, legumes, nuts and seeds. They actively lower cholesterol by partially blocking the absorption of LDL or 'bad' cholesterol in the digestive system."

## Cut out (or at least cut down) unhealthy habits

We all have our vices, but if your vices are bringing up your cholesterol levels to unhealthy amounts, it may be time to cut them out, or at least cut back however much you can.

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These are the usual suspects:

- drinking alcohol
- smoking

And of course, if you're carrying around a few extra kilos, getting back down to a healthier weight can do a world of good for your cholesterol levels, and all sorts of other health issues besides.

"Losing just 5–10 percent of your total body weight helps to reduce triglycerides and increase HDL levels," says Jess.

The same can be said for your stress levels – which can be just as hard to drop as chips and ice cream, but just as worthwhile for your health.



## Specialised diets that some people use to lower their cholesterol

If it's all a bit confusing trying to figure out what's hot and what's not when it comes to lowering cholesterol through your diet, you should speak to your doctor about following a specialised one.

This can be easier to follow as there are clear guidelines available through your GP, nutritionists, and even online, as well as oodles of recipe books that can inspire your meal planning.

Here are some of the best!

### A vegetarian (or even vegan) diet

Vegetarian and vegan diets naturally avoid a lot of the things that can bump up cholesterol to unhealthy levels, while including plenty of food sources that bring them down.

This means no meat or seafood, but a variety of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and soy products.

If you're going to take this route, it's a good idea to chat to a nutritionist or your doctor when you get started. If you've spent a lifetime relying on meat for your protein and iron intake, a professional can point you in the right direction for still getting enough of what you need from other sources to nourish your body.

### The Mediterranean diet

Those who live around the Mediterranean are known for their longevity and general health and wellbeing. And while waking up to Santorini views and beaches would make

anyone feel great every day, much of their good health is attributed to the classic Mediterranean diet.

To follow this diet, picture yourself living on a small island in Greece about 100 years ago. Now eat the foods available to you and be thankful you still get to use your phone.

In real terms, that means plenty of fruits and vegetables, loads of seafood, piles of nuts, slathers of olive oil, and as much whole grain food as you like!

It also means nothing processed, deep fried, or brimming with sugar. On your island, you'll find yourself with occasional supplies of other meats such as goat and chicken, but not enough to eat it all the time.

[More than one study](#) has shown that the Mediterranean diet has had genuine benefits for heart health, but it's also good for your blood sugar levels, brain function and more.

Part of this reason is due to this diet's reliance on healthy unsaturated fats.

Healthy unsaturated fats are found in tasty morsels such as avocado, nuts, seeds, and oily fish. These foods are loaded with omega 3 and omega 6, which aren't just good for heart health, but can boost your mood as well.

The Mediterranean diet doesn't come with strict rules like a vegan diet, so it can be a good option for those looking for a little more flexibility as they work to bring down their cholesterol levels. And as always, speak to your doctor or a qualified nutritionist before embarking on a dietary change.

## The TLC diet

The acronym alone is enough to consider this specialty diet, but this rose would smell just as sweet by any other name, as it is a diet made specifically for lowering cholesterol.

In this case, TLC stands for [Therapeutic Lifestyle Changes](#), and it was created by the National Institute of Health's National Cholesterol Program in the United States. It's basically a fancy sounding name for a diet that's been created specifically to lower cholesterol and be kinder to your heart.

It does this in three ways: diet, exercise and healthy weight management.

For the diet part, it recommends cutting down your saturated fat intake to no more than twice per week, choosing lean meats, and limiting whole eggs. Fish lovers rejoice, because it also suggests eating oily fish two or three times per week, as well as adding more whole grains to your diet.

As for exercise, TLC suggests 30 minutes four to five times per week. That's only four or so hours out of 168 hours in a week! And for weight management, the TLC diet suggests giving your weight some TLC of its own and maintaining a healthy number on the scale.

Overall, the goal with the TLC diet is to keep your saturated fat intake to less than 7% of your total calories, and to keep your total dietary cholesterol intake to less than 200 milligrams per day. In other words that are easier to remember, keep your fat and cholesterol intake to a minimum, and get moving as often as you can.

Keep in mind, this isn't a 'weight loss' diet, but a 'healthy heart' diet. And of course, should only be undertaken with advice and recommendations from your doc.

## How to determine if you're at risk of heart disease

The best – and only real way to determine if you're at risk of heart disease is to visit your doctor for a blood test and checkup.

A doctor will ask about your health factors such as family history, health issues, age, smoking history, sex, and cultural background. They will also take your blood pressure and do a blood test to determine your cholesterol.

Unfortunately they probably won't hand out a lollipop for being such a responsible adult once you're done, but you can always treat yourself on the way home (or it might need to be a celery stick instead, depending on how it goes).

If you have no known risk factors (huzzah), it's recommended to start getting checked at the age of 45 and above for men, and 55 and above for women. If you have risk factors such as a history of smoking or diabetes, you may need to start getting checks sooner – chat to your doctor to find out when is best for you.

In the meantime, the New Zealand Heart Foundation has created a highly handy '[My Heart Check](#)'. It's not as accurate as a doctor's visit, but it can give you an idea of where your heart health could stand based on factors such as your age, weight, and medical history.

(And who doesn't love online quizzes? You can do this one, then a Harry Potter sorting hat quiz right after.)

At the very least, it can tell you if you need to make a beeline to your doctor's office for a more accurate assessment, or if you could simply do with making a few minor changes to ensure you're doing the best for your heart.

## Looking after yourself to look after others

If staring down a piping hot pizza on a cold night and saying no was easy, we'd all be as healthy as Jess Wharton. It's tough making the lifestyle changes necessary to improve health, but if doing it for yourself isn't enough motivation, think about those around you.

This article is for information only and should not be considered as advice. Always seek the guidance of your doctor or other qualified health professional with any questions you may have regarding your health or a medical condition.

