

Managing Your Cholesterol: A Guide to Diet, Lifestyle, and Treatment Options

High cholesterol is one of the most common health concerns we see at the practice, and the good news is that there are many effective ways to manage it. Whether you've just been told your cholesterol is high or you've been managing it for years, understanding your options can help you take control of your heart health.

Why Does Cholesterol Matter?

Cholesterol is a fatty substance in your blood. While your body needs some cholesterol to function properly, too much of the "bad" cholesterol (LDL cholesterol) can build up in your arteries and increase your risk of heart attacks and strokes. Managing your cholesterol is one of the most important things you can do to protect your heart.

Starting with Diet and Lifestyle

Before we talk about medications, it's worth knowing that what you eat and how you move can make a real difference to your cholesterol levels. In fact, a healthy diet can lower your LDL cholesterol by up to 30-40 mg/dL in some people.

What to eat more of:

- Vegetables, fruits, and whole grains
- Beans, lentils, and chickpeas
- Oily fish (like salmon, mackerel, and sardines)
- Nuts and seeds
- Olive oil and other vegetable oils

What to limit:

- Saturated fats (found in fatty meats, butter, and full-fat dairy)
- Processed foods and ready meals
- Sugary drinks and sweets
- Red meat

The Mediterranean diet—rich in vegetables, fish, olive oil, and nuts—has been shown to reduce heart disease risk. You don't need to make all these changes at once; even small steps in the right direction can help.

Getting active is also important. Aim for 150 minutes of moderate activity (like brisk walking) each week, or 75 minutes of more vigorous exercise. Physical activity can lower your LDL cholesterol by 2.5-6 mg/dL and has many other benefits for your heart and overall health.

When Medication Is Needed: Statins

For many people, diet and lifestyle changes alone aren't enough to get cholesterol to a safe level, especially if you have other risk factors like diabetes, high blood pressure, or a history of heart disease. This is where statins come in.

What are statins?

Statins are tablets that work in your liver to reduce the amount of cholesterol your body makes. They're the most effective cholesterol-lowering medication we have, and they've been proven to prevent heart attacks and strokes.

How well do they work?

For every 39 mg/dL reduction in LDL cholesterol, statins reduce the risk of heart attacks and strokes by about 22% and reduce the risk of death by 10%.

Are they safe?

Yes, for the vast majority of people. Statins have been used safely by millions of people worldwide for decades. Serious side effects are very rare:

- Serious muscle problems occur in less than 1 in 1,000 people
- Serious liver problems occur in about 1 in 100,000 people
- There's a small increase in the risk of developing diabetes (about 2 in 1,000 people per year), but the heart benefits far outweigh this risk

What about muscle aches?

Some people do experience muscle aches on statins, though studies show this is less common than many people think. If you do get muscle symptoms, please don't just stop your statin—come and talk to us. Often, switching to a different statin or adjusting the dose can solve the problem, and there are other options available too.

Adding Ezetimibe

If you're already taking the maximum dose of statin you can tolerate but your cholesterol is still too high, we might suggest adding ezetimibe.

What is ezetimibe?

Ezetimibe works differently from statins. Instead of reducing cholesterol production in your liver, it blocks cholesterol absorption in your intestines. It's taken as a single 10 mg tablet once daily.

How well does it work?

When added to a statin, ezetimibe can lower your LDL cholesterol by an additional 20-25%. Studies have shown that this extra reduction translates into fewer heart attacks and strokes.

Is it safe?

Yes, ezetimibe has an excellent safety profile. It doesn't cause the muscle problems that some people experience with statins, and serious side effects are extremely rare.

Bempedoic Acid: A Newer Option

Bempedoic acid is a newer cholesterol-lowering medication that's particularly useful for people who can't tolerate statins due to muscle aches.

What is bempedoic acid?

Bempedoic acid works in a similar way to statins by reducing cholesterol production in the liver, but it's only activated in the liver—not in your muscles. This means it's much less likely to cause muscle problems. It's taken as a single 180 mg tablet once daily.

How well does it work?

Bempedoic acid lowers LDL cholesterol by about 17-28%. Importantly, a large study published in 2023 showed that it reduces the risk of heart attacks and the need for procedures like stents or bypass surgery in people who can't take statins.

Is it safe?

Bempedoic acid is generally well tolerated. The main things to be aware of are a slightly increased risk of gout and tendon problems, so we'll discuss whether it's right for you based on your medical history. It can also increase uric acid levels, which we can monitor with blood tests.

When might we use it?

Bempedoic acid is particularly helpful if you've tried statins but couldn't tolerate them due to muscle aches, or if you need additional cholesterol lowering on top of your current treatment.

Working Together

Managing cholesterol is a partnership between you and your healthcare team. The most important things to remember are:

1. **Diet and lifestyle changes are always important**, even if you're taking medication
2. **Statins are safe and effective** for most people and are the first-choice medication
3. **If statins alone aren't enough**, adding ezetimibe can provide extra benefit
4. **If you can't tolerate statins**, bempedoic acid is an excellent alternative
5. **Never stop your medication without talking to us first**—we can always find solutions if you're having problems

If you have any concerns about your cholesterol or your medications, please book an appointment to discuss them. We're here to help you find the right approach for you.

Remember: managing your cholesterol is one of the most important things you can do to protect your heart and live a longer, healthier life.

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