

What is high cholesterol?

- High cholesterol is when you have too much of a fatty substance called cholesterol in your blood.
- It's mainly caused by eating fatty food, not exercising enough, being overweight, smoking and drinking alcohol. It can also run in families.
- You can lower your cholesterol by eating healthily and getting more exercise. Some people also need to take medicine.
- Too much cholesterol can block your blood vessels. It makes you more likely to have heart problems or a stroke.
- High cholesterol does not cause symptoms. You can only find out if you have it from a blood test.

How to lower your cholesterol

There are things you can do yourself to help reduce your cholesterol, like eating less fatty foods and being more active.

Eat less fatty food

To reduce your cholesterol, try to cut down on fatty food, especially food that contains a type of fat called saturated fat.

You can still have foods that contain a healthier type of fat called unsaturated fat.

Check [labels on food](#) to see what type of fat it has in it.

Try to eat more:

- oily fish, like mackerel and salmon
- brown rice, bread and pasta
- nuts and seeds
- fruits and vegetables

Try to eat less:

- meat pies, sausages and fatty meat
- butter, lard and ghee
- cream and hard cheese, like cheddar
- cakes and biscuits
- food that contains coconut oil or palm oil

Fats explained

All fats are high in calories, so it's important to bear this in mind if you are watching your weight.

In terms of your heart, it's important to think about the type of fat you are eating.

A typical diet is made up of different types of fat. While you need to make sure you eat foods that contain healthy monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats, too much saturated fat can increase the amount of [cholesterol](#) in your blood, which can increase your risk of developing [coronary heart disease](#).

You can have a high cholesterol level even if you are a healthy weight. And even if your cholesterol level is healthy, it's important to [eat well](#) and to [be active](#) to keep your heart healthy.

Choosing fats

Monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats provide essential fatty acids and fat soluble vitamins - so they're an important part of your diet.

Wherever possible replace saturated fats with small amounts of monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats.

The average man should have no more than 30g of saturated fat a day, and the average woman no more than 20g a day.

Type of fats

Monounsaturated

Have these in small amounts. They can help to maintain healthy cholesterol levels.



Found in

Avocados, olives, olive oil, rapeseed oil. Almonds, cashews, hazelnuts, peanuts, pistachios and spreads made from these nuts.

Polyunsaturated

Have these in small amounts. Polyunsaturated fats help to maintain healthy cholesterol levels and provide essential fatty acids.



Oily fish, corn oil, sesame oil, soya oil, and spreads made from those oils. Flaxseed, pine nuts, sesame seeds, sunflower seeds, and walnuts.

Saturated

Swap these for unsaturated fats. Eating too much saturated fat increases the amount of cholesterol in your blood.



Processed meats like sausages, ham, burgers. Fatty meat. Hard cheeses including cheddar. Whole milk and cream. Butter, lard, ghee, suet, palm oil and coconut oil.

Trans

Avoid wherever possible. They can increase cholesterol in your blood. Foods with hydrogenated oils or fats in them likely contain trans fats.



Fried foods, takeaways, snacks like biscuits, cakes or pastries. Hard margarines.

Top tips to help you reduce your saturated fat

- Swap butter, lard, ghee and coconut and palm oils with small amounts of monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats, such as olive, rapeseed or sunflower oils and spreads.
- Choose lean cuts of meat and make sure you trim any excess fat and remove the skin from chicken and turkey.
- Instead of pouring oils straight from the bottle, use a spray oil or measure out your oils with a teaspoon.
- Read food labels to help you make choices that are lower in saturated fat.
- Opt to grill, bake, steam, boil or poach your foods.

- Make your own salad dressings using ingredients like balsamic vinegar, low fat yoghurt, lemon juice, and herbs, with a dash of olive oil.
- Use semi-skimmed, 1% or skimmed milk rather than whole or condensed milk.
- Cottage cheese, ricotta and extra light soft cheese are examples of lower fat cheese options. Remember that many cheeses are high in saturated fat so keep your portions small - matchbox sized. Opt for strongly flavoured varieties and grate it to make a little go a long way

Exercise more

Aim to do at least 150 minutes (2.5 hours) of exercise a week.

Some good things to try when starting out include:

- walking – try to walk fast enough so your heart starts beating faster
- swimming
- cycling

Try a few different exercises to find something you like doing. You're more likely to keep doing it if you enjoy it.

[Find out more about ways to get active](#)

Stop smoking

Smoking can raise your cholesterol and make you more likely to have serious problems like heart attacks, strokes and cancer.

If you want to stop smoking, you can get help and support from:

- The local Pharmacies
- The [NHS Stop Smoking Service](#) – your GP can refer you or you can ring the helpline on 0300 123 1044 (England only)

They can give you useful tips and advice about ways to stop cravings.

[Find out more about how to stop smoking](#)

Cut down on alcohol

Try to:

- avoid drinking more than 14 [units of alcohol](#) a week
- have several drink-free days each week
- avoid drinking lots of alcohol in a short time (binge drinking)

Ask your GP for help and advice if you're struggling to cut down.

[Find out more about where to get alcohol support](#)

Find out more

- Use the British Heart Foundation [Heart Matters recipe finder](#) for hundreds of heart healthy recipes