

Life's Simple 7: Control Cholesterol

Hi, I'm Alan and unfortunately, I know what it takes to get cholesterol numbers back in line. It took me about 6 years to work my way through school. And you know how I did it? Waiting tables. The good news is I got my school paid off and graduated with no debt. The bad news? I spent 6 years making poor food choices, eating the high-fat leftovers from the kitchens of the restaurants where I worked. After graduating, I got a physical and had to face the results of all those fried cheese sticks I'd been grazing on, thinking I was saving myself a few bucks on the grocery store bill. Not a good idea. My cholesterol levels were terrible. But now I eat smart and stay active. I feel great, and my numbers remind me that my plan is working well.

Let's be clear about what cholesterol is and why it's important for reaching your health goals. Everyone has cholesterol. It's the waxy substance in your bloodstream and cells. Some cholesterol is important for good health.

But too much cholesterol in your blood can put you at major risk for heart disease and stroke.

When too much LDL or bad cholesterol circulates in the blood, it can slowly build up inside the walls of your arteries that feed your heart and brain. Cholesterol particles get lodged into your arterial walls and get stuck there. Then cholesterol combines with other substances in your blood to form plaque, a thick, hard deposit that can narrow the arteries and make them less flexible. So remember, you want your blood to be able to go with the flow so keep cholesterol low.

My first step was to follow my healthcare provider's advice. Most of your cholesterol is made in your liver, so getting cholesterol levels adjusted may require medication. Just follow your medical advice carefully because you need to do what it takes to get your LDL cholesterol numbers below 200.

My second step was to change the way that I ate. About 25 percent of your cholesterol comes directly from what you eat, so we have a lot of control of those numbers. Pay attention to your food choices. Always.

It was a challenge for me to make these changes because I was used to eating everything fried. But I can't tell you how much better I feel now that I've cut those foods out of my diet. So eat foods that are low in cholesterol and saturated fats, and stay away from the trans fats. What does that look like? You'll want to fill your plate with colorful fruits and vegetables, lean meats like chicken or fish, fat-free and low-fat dairy products, and whole grain-carbohydrates. For starters, you can look for the American Heart Association's heart checkmark on products in your local grocery store. You'll also find more information on eating well, right here on our simple 7 site. And of course, you can still dine out and live well when you learn to make the right food choices.

My third step was to get active. I used to think I was too busy to exercise, and all those lucky people I'd see out jogging must be living a life of leisure. But once I made physical activity a habit, I realized how much I needed it. It had nothing to do with leisure time. It was all about priorities.

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So I chose wellness, for my cholesterol, my relationships and my life.

Regular physical activity can boost your HDL or good cholesterol. If your good cholesterol is higher, it helps keep the bad cholesterol from getting stuck in your arteries. Even mildly vigorous activities, if you're intentional about doing them every day, can really help. You can benefit from simple things like walking, gardening, housework, or dancing. Get creative with what you like to do and find some ways to put physical activity into your daily routines.

In addition to this, what you'll find on 'my life check' section of the website, the American Heart Association has an entire section on their website dedicated to cholesterol control. And I encourage you to check it out.

Today is the day you put your plan into action. Eat well, take a brisk walk, and get your life moving in a healthy direction. You'll be so glad you did.