

Life's Essential 8: Control Cholesterol

Hi, I'm Alan and unfortunately I know what it takes to get cholesterol numbers back in line. It took me about six years to work my way through school and you know how I did it? Waiting tables. The good news is that I got my school paid off and graduated with no debt. The bad news? I spent six 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 had 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 puts 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 health care 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.

My second step was to change the way I ate.

About 25% 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 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. 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.

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 fun ways to put physical activity into your daily routines.

Today is the day to 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!