

Ask the Pharmacist



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Plain Talk on Cholesterol

Express Scripts cardiovascular specialist pharmacists can help answer questions about cholesterol and good cardiovascular health.

Consider this: According to the American Heart Association cardiovascular disease is the No. 1 killer in America and atherosclerosis – the hardening and narrowing of arteries – is the most common cause of this disease that increases heart attack and stroke risks. Understanding atherosclerosis can help save lives.

The biggest controllable risk factor for atherosclerosis is high cholesterol. As blood cholesterol levels rise, so does the risk of coronary heart disease. But not all cholesterol is bad.

Good and Bad Cholesterol

There are two types of cholesterol and the difference is significant. Good cholesterol that decreases heart disease risk is known as HDL, and bad cholesterol that increases heart disease risk is known as LDL.

As a specialist pharmacist in the Express Scripts Cardiovascular Therapeutic Resource Center®, I counsel patients on maintaining healthy cholesterol levels – and if needed – proper medication management.

Here are a few lifestyle changes that can help keep cholesterol levels balanced:

- **Eat healthy:** Patients should choose a diet rich in fresh fruits and vegetables, and low in salt, fat and cholesterol. For example, according to Medical News Today simply eating an apple a day has been found on average to reduce LDL cholesterol by 23%.
- **Know your fats:** Saturated fat, trans fat and dietary cholesterol raise LDL levels. Saturated fats come from animal fats and dairy products, and trans fats are found commonly in baked goods.
- **Eat the right fats:** Patients should choose good fats from seeds, nuts, oily fish and olive oil as part of a healthy diet.



- **Lose extra weight:** Losing as little as 5% to 10% of body weight can significantly reduce LDL levels.
- **Exercise:** Regular physical activity raises HDL levels. Thirty minutes of aerobic activity such as brisk walking or jogging three to five days a week can help one's body produce more HDL.
- **Stop smoking:** Cigarette smoking decreases the good HDL cholesterol.

Understand Drug Therapy Options

Lifestyle modifications are primary and must be continued even with drug therapy, but when diet and exercise alone are insufficient, drug therapy may help.

Statin Medications

Statins are the only class of drugs that not only lower LDL cholesterol levels, but also are proven to reduce the risk of cardiovascular events. Every 10% decrease in cholesterol reduces the chance of a heart attack and stroke by 15%.

Statins do have side effects. Muscle pain is the most common side effect reported in 5% to 15% of patients.