

Balancing Act!

Improving HDL Cholesterol

Cardiovascular disease (CVD) is the number one cause of mortality for U.S. men and women. The leading risk factor is atherosclerosis, which is the buildup of plaque on the walls of the arteries from cholesterol.

There are two types of cholesterol, LDL or “bad” cholesterol and HDL or “good” cholesterol. LDL is what builds up on the sides of the artery walls and creates blockages which can lead to heart attacks. HDL’s main role is to transfer the LDL cholesterol from plaque depots in blood vessels to the liver for excretion, a process that is called reverse cholesterol transport. Raising your HDL levels, especially above 60 mg/dl, has been shown to have a protective effect and lower your risk of cardiovascular disease.

It has been shown that adults with normal total cholesterol levels, the people with low HDL levels (less than 35 mg/dl) have more cardiovascular events (such as heart attacks and unstable chest pain) than their counterparts with high HDL. Moreover, for every 1 mg/dl increase in HDL, the risk for cardiovascular disease drops 2% in men and 3% in women.

There are four effective lifestyle changes that elevate HDL levels. When implemented *together*, these non-pharmacological interventions raise HDL more successfully.

Aerobic Exercise. Aerobic exercise has been shown to significantly increase HDL levels (9%) while also causing statistically significant decreases in blood triglycerides (11%).

After a review of several research studies, the minimum threshold needed to raise HDL is 120 minutes per week (or approximately 900 calories of energy expenditure per week). Greater durations of cardiovascular exercise elicit impressive improvements in HDL levels.



Diet. The American Heart Association (2001) recommends a diet low in saturated fat, trans fat, cholesterol and sodium; and rich in fruits, vegetables, whole-grain and high-fiber foods, and fat-free and low-fat dairy.

A Mediterranean diet (which emphasizes healthy fats, fruits, nuts, fish and vegetables) is abundantly rich in omega-3 fatty acids and thus an optional lifestyle eating plan to help raise HDL. The weight loss that often accompanies this eating lifestyle (in conjunction with the exercise program discussed above) further helps improve HDL levels in men and women.

Moderate Alcohol Intake. Moderate alcohol intake (no more than 2 drinks per day) has been shown to increase HDL. On the other hand, heavy alcohol consumption leads to fatty-acid accumulation in the blood. Heavy consumption also impairs the removal of triglyceride-containing lipoproteins from the blood, thus elevating the risk of coronary heart disease.

Smoking Cessation. The more a person smokes, the more deleterious the effect on HDL. The great news, however, is that when a person stops smoking, HDL levels will start to rise in as little as two weeks.

The main message: superhuman changes are not required to positively impact on your HDL level and therefore decrease your risk for CVD.