
Cholesterol in the Diet

Cholesterol is a fatty substance in your body. It is also in foods made from animals. There is a lot of it in meat, including beef, pork, chicken, and turkey. Whole-milk dairy products, egg yolks, and a few shellfish, such as shrimp, also have a lot of cholesterol.

Your body needs cholesterol to make hormones and build nerve cells. Your body makes cholesterol, so you don't have to get it from food. If you eat foods with a lot of cholesterol, saturated fat, or trans fat, you can get too much cholesterol. High cholesterol increases your risk for heart disease.

How are saturated fat and trans fats related to cholesterol levels?

Like cholesterol, saturated fats are mostly in animal products. Your body makes more cholesterol when you eat saturated fat. This means that it's good to eat less cholesterol and less saturated fat.

Trans fats can also raise your cholesterol level. Trans fats are in animal products, but most are in processed foods, such as cakes, cookies, potato chips and crackers.

Some plant foods, such as palm oil, coconut oil, and cocoa butter, contain saturated fat, but it is not known if these fats are as harmful as the saturated fat in animal products.

How much cholesterol do animal products have?

As the table below shows, some foods have more cholesterol and saturated fat than others. The healthiest diets include mostly foods that are low in cholesterol, saturated fat, and trans fat.

Most meats have about the same amount of cholesterol per serving, regardless of the type or cut of meat. However, the amount of saturated fat in various meats can be very different. High-fat cuts, such as prime rib and dark-meat poultry with the skin, have a lot more saturated fat than lean cuts, such as pork tenderloin and chicken breast without skin.

Whole-milk dairy products, such as whole milk, cheese, ice cream, sour cream, and butter, have a lot of cholesterol and saturated fat. The good news is that food producers can remove both cholesterol and saturated fat from dairy foods. When dairy is skimmed of its fats, the cholesterol is skimmed off along with it. Skim (nonfat) dairy products are a healthy food choice.

Shellfish are low in saturated fat. Some shellfish are high in cholesterol, but the saturated fat is so low that these foods are still healthy. Fin fish, such as salmon, tuna, trout, and halibut, are relatively low in cholesterol and saturated fat.

Cholesterol and Saturated Fat Content of Selected Foods

Food	Fat (grams)	Cholesterol (milligrams)
1 whole egg	2.0 g	219 mg
8 ounces (oz) whole milk	4.5 g	25 mg
8 ounces skim milk	0.36 g	5 mg
1 tablespoon butter	7 g	30 mg
4 tablespoon sour cream	5.5 g	24 mg
3 oz. pork tenderloin	2 g	65 mg
3 oz. pork sausage	7.5 g	70 mg
3 oz sirloin steak	3 g	76 mg
3 oz beef ribs	5 g	69 mg
3 oz chicken breast without skin	1 g	73 mg
3 oz chicken thigh with skin	3.7 g	79 mg
3 oz shrimp	0.25	200 mg
3 oz crab	0.15 to 0.2	45 to 85 mg
3 oz salmon	1.5	50 mg
1/2 cup vegetable shortening	25.5 g	0 mg

Are there foods that can help lower my cholesterol levels?

Add these foods to your diet to help lower your cholesterol:

- oatmeal, oat bran, and high-fiber foods
- fatty fish (salmon, tuna, mackerel, herring, sardines)
- walnuts, almonds and peanuts
- olive oil (no more than 2 tablespoons a day if you are watching your weight)
- products that contain plant sterols or and plant stanols (look for these in some brands of margarine, orange juice, and yogurt).

How much cholesterol can I have in my diet?

The guidelines for cholesterol in the diet depend on your medical condition. The recommendations are:

- less than 200 mg a day if you have high cholesterol or heart disease
- less than 300 mg of cholesterol a day if you do not have high cholesterol or heart disease.

Everyone should try to avoid saturated and trans fats.

Limiting cholesterol, saturated fat, and trans fat is easy if you get in the habit of cooking lean. Choose the leanest cuts of meats and dairy products, including more fish and less processed food. Include a lot of whole grains, fruits, and vegetables in your diet. Plant foods, including nuts, seeds, and vegetable oils, do not have any cholesterol.

Disclaimer

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