

Keep Cholesterol In Check

Exercise and healthy food choices, which can include beef, are two important ingredients for heart health.

by *Kindra Gordon*

If ever a statistic should grab your attention, this one should: Every 20 seconds someone in the United States suffers a heart attack, amounting to 1.5 million heart attacks that strike Americans each year and making coronary heart disease the leading cause of death in this country.

Hopefully, those numbers are eye-opening enough to prompt some healthier choices to reduce your own heart disease risk. Where should you start? Focus on getting your cholesterol checked regularly and ensuring that it is at a healthy level — below 200.

Janet Bond Brill, a doctor and author of the book *Cholesterol Down*, says, “The scientific evidence is indisputable that lowering your cholesterol reduces your risk of contracting heart disease and of dying from a heart attack.”

Watch what you eat

The first step in lowering cholesterol is to monitor your food choices and understand the different types of fat in food; some, such as saturated fats, are harmful, while others like omega-3 and unsaturated fat can be beneficial.

Karen Hanson, director of nutrition with the Kansas Beef Council, explains, “Not all fats are created equal. Naturally occurring trans fat is structurally different than man-made trans fat and, therefore, acts very differently in terms of health effects.”

Specifically, Hanson says that because of

their structural differences, the trans fatty acids naturally occurring in beef and dairy foods have very different physiological and biological functions compared to the man-made trans fat found in processed foods.

As an example, conjugated linoleic acid (CLA) is a naturally occurring trans fat in beef and dairy products. Research has shown that CLA has some healthy attributes, including boosting immune function and reducing the risk of cancer, whereas man-made trans fats can contribute to heart disease and other health issues.

Likewise there are different types of cholesterol. Cholesterol is found in our bodies in particles called lipoproteins. Low-density lipoproteins (LDL) are deemed “bad” cholesterol because high levels of them can lead to a buildup of plaque in your arteries. This thick mass narrows your arteries, restricting the flow of blood; think of it like trying to sip juice through a clogged straw. Eventually the plaque ruptures and a blood clot forms, cutting off the flow of blood, oxygen and nutrients to the brain and causing a stroke or heart attack.

High-density lipoproteins (HDL) are considered “good” cholesterol because of their ability to pick up the LDL clogging your arteries and take it to the liver, where it’s processed and eventually excreted.

Hanson shares an easy way to remember the difference between HDL and LDL. She says, “H is for healthy; these are the good guys. L is for lousy; the bad cholesterol.”

Once you understand which fats are bad and which are healthy, you can monitor your food choices. Making low-fat choices can reduce the amount of artery-clogging saturated fats, trans fats and cholesterol you eat.

With that said, because animal products are the only source of cholesterol in the food supply, a common misconception is that beef can’t be included in a low-fat diet. But Hanson says there are 29 lean cuts of beef that do fit the U.S. Department of

Agriculture (USDA) parameters to be called “lean” and be part of a healthy diet. Examples of these cuts include a T-bone steak, top loin (strip) steak, top round roast and steak, and 95% lean ground beef.

Hanson says a 3-ounce (oz.) cooked serving of the 29 cuts of lean beef have, on average, only 1.2 grams (g) more saturated fat than a skinless chicken breast. Specifically, a 3-oz. portion of these beef cuts has less than 10 g of fat and less than 4.5 g of saturated fat. (A 3-oz. portion of lean meat is equal in size to a deck of cards.)

Additionally, Hanson says, “Beef is a

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— *Karen Hanson*

Eight cholesterol-lowering superfoods

In her book *Cholesterol Down*, Janet Bond Brill touts eight “superfoods” known for their ability to lower cholesterol. They include:

1. Oatmeal. Oats are rich in beta-glucan, a special type of soluble fiber that acts like a sponge to soak up cholesterol.
2. Almonds. Almonds contain two powerful antioxidants — vitamin E and flavonoids — both of which prevent the oxidation of “bad” cholesterol, low-density lipoprotein (LDL), a precursor to plaque buildup.
3. Flaxseed. Flaxseeds contain lignan and soluble fiber, which block the production of LDL and increase your body’s ability to get rid of cholesterol. Flaxseeds should be ground so your body can better absorb the nutrients.
4. Garlic. Garlic impedes the liver’s ability to make cholesterol.
5. Phytosterol-containing foods. Phytosterols are a type of fat

found in plant foods like nuts, seeds, fruits, vegetable oils and even chocolate. They interfere with cholesterol absorption by blocking cholesterol from entering your intestinal cells.

6. Apples. Particularly the skin and outer flesh of apples are rich in polyphenols, powerful antioxidants that help prevent plaque buildup.

7. Beans. Kidney beans (as well as peas and lentils) contain a special type of soluble fiber that gets fermented in the colon. Healthy bacteria eat the fiber and bean sugars to form short-chain fatty acids, which travel to the liver and hinder LDL cholesterol production.

8. Soy protein. Soy protein contains phytoestrogens, compounds that increase the number and effectiveness of LDL cholesterol receptors, improving the liver’s ability to get rid of cholesterol in your bloodstream.

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nutrient powerhouse because it is a nutrient-dense food. Compared to that same serving size of chicken, beef has eight times more vitamin B₁₂, six times more zinc (Zn) and three times more iron (Fe).”

Hanson says the best nutrition advice is to have a diet that’s moderate in all food groups. She concludes, “Good nutrition is an overall picture, and beef can certainly be part of a healthy diet. It’s a matter of education.”

Include fiber and exercise

In addition to healthy eating, increasing the fiber in your diet and exercising daily are also important tools for lowering your risk of heart disease.

The National Cholesterol Education Program recommends adults consume 10-25 g of soluble fiber a day, but most of us get only 3-4 g. Fiber is important because it is believed to help lower cholesterol by

binding dietary cholesterol and preventing it from being digested.

You can increase the fiber in your diet by consuming more complex carbohydrate foods, including fruits, vegetables and whole grains. Specifically apples, beans, carrots and barley are good fiber additions to the diet. (For more ideas see “Eight cholesterol-lowering superfoods.”)

If you’re not apt to eat high-fiber foods, Brill recommends in her book *Cholesterol Down* that adults take Metamucil as a fiber supplement. She calls it “the most powerful LDL-lowering viscous soluble fiber in existence,” and explains that it contains psyllium husk, a fiber that soaks up cholesterol so you excrete it rather than absorb cholesterol into your intestinal cells.

Brill recommends getting half your fiber from a supplement and the rest from food. Take half your daily dose of Metamucil before breakfast and half after dinner to

avoid overloading your body on fiber, which can cause gas or constipation.

Regarding exercise, most doctors say that brisk exercise speeds up the blood flow in your arteries, reducing your chances of inflammation and clogging — two precursors to hardening of your arteries. The rule of thumb is to get 30 minutes of brisk exercise daily.

In the best-case scenario, after six months of heart-smart food choices and regular exercise, you should see your cholesterol drop and find yourself feeling better. However, high cholesterol can’t always be controlled by diet, as it may be linked to family genetics. In those situations doctors may prescribe cholesterol-lowering medications, but they will still recommend the medicine be combined with regular exercise and a healthy diet.



More food tips

Additional guidelines that most nutritionists offer for making healthy food choices include:

- ▶ Try to avoid processed foods when you can, and choose fresh plant foods for meals and snacks.
- ▶ The two types of unsaturated fats that are acceptable on your food label are monounsaturated and polyunsaturated. Corn, cottonseed, safflower, sesame, sunflower and soybean oils all contain unsaturated fats.
- ▶ Some vegetable oils are rich in saturated fats, such as cocoa butter, coconut oil and palm oil. Read the label and you’ll see that these oils appear in most processed foods (cake mixes, candy, chips, cookies, crackers, non-dairy creamer, non-dairy whipped topping, etc.)
- ▶ Watch out for the word “hydrogenated,” which tells you that the unsaturated fat has been converted to trans fats by the process of hydrogenation. Trans fats are even more unhealthy than saturated fats.
- ▶ Trimming excess fat from meat before cooking reduces fat up to 50%, and added fat can be kept to a minimum by using low-fat cooking methods, such as broiling, grilling and roasting, or moist-heat cooking methods such as braising and stewing.
- ▶ Organ meats are especially high in cholesterol, including liver, kidney and brain.

Table 1: The 29 leanest cuts of beef

| | Calories | Saturated Fat (grams) | Total Fat (grams) |
|--|-----------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Eye Round Roast and Steak* | 144 | 1.4 | 4.0 |
| Sirloin Tip Side Steak | 143 | 1.6 | 4.1 |
| Top Round Roast and Steak* | 157 | 1.6 | 4.6 |
| Bottom Round Roast and Steak* | 139 | 1.7 | 4.9 |
| Top Sirloin Steak | 156 | 1.9 | 4.9 |
| Brisket, Flat Half | 167 | 1.9 | 5.1 |
| 95% Lean Ground Beef | 139 | 2.4 | 5.1 |
| Round Tip Roast and Steak* | 148 | 1.9 | 5.3 |
| Round Steak | 154 | 1.9 | 5.3 |
| Shank Cross Cuts | 171 | 1.9 | 5.4 |
| Chuck Shoulder Pot Roast | 147 | 1.8 | 5.7 |
| Sirloin Tip Center Roast and Steak* | 150 | 2.1 | 5.8 |
| Chuck Shoulder Steak | 161 | 1.9 | 6.0 |
| Bottom Round (Western Griller) Steak | 155 | 2.2 | 6.0 |
| Top Loin (Strip) Steak | 161 | 2.3 | 6.0 |
| Shoulder Petite Tender and Medallions* | 150 | 2.4 | 6.1 |
| Flank Steak | 158 | 2.6 | 6.3 |
| Shoulder Center (Ranch) Steak | 155 | 2.4 | 6.5 |
| Tri-Tip Roast and Steak* | 158 | 2.6 | 7.1 |
| Tenderloin Roast and Steak* | 170 | 2.7 | 7.1 |
| T-Bone Steak | 172 | 3.0 | 8.2 |

*Two cuts with similar nutrition profile.

Note: Calories and fat based on 3-ounce (oz.) servings, visible fat trimmed. “Lean” beef must contain less than 10 grams (g) of total fat, 4.5 g or less of saturated fat, and less than 95 milligrams (mg) of cholesterol per 3-oz. serving (and 100 g).