Everyone is talking about cholesterol: It's good. It's bad. Don't eat shrimp. Eat lots of oatmeal! Few people have the facts straight. What we do know for sure is there are many dietary changes that will lower your total cholesterol and reduce your risk of heart disease and stroke.

Cholesterol is a natural substance made by the liver to carry fats and fat-based vitamins in the water-based bloodstream. Cholesterol is needed for life. Fats and fat-soluble vitamins need cholesterol to be a carrier molecule to whisk them from point A to point B in your body. We need cholesterol to carry vitamin K to our finger if we have to stop a cut from bleeding; to get vitamin A to our eyes for conversion into retinol; and to get fats into and out of cells for energy processing. More than just a transporter, cholesterol also acts as a building block for hormones and maintains the integrity of cellular membranes.

There are five main types of cholesterol in our bodies, but only two are present in large quantities: LDL (low-density lipoprotein) and HDL (high-density lipoprotein). Both are needed.

LDL carries fat and fat-soluble molecules away from the digestive system to be used by the peripheral cells. HDL carries fat and fat-soluble molecules back to the digestive system, so they can be processed out.

LDL has a tarnished reputation and is nicknamed the bad cholesterol, while HDL is referred to as good cholesterol; however, both are beneficial. What makes the good/bad label significant is when the proportion of LDL is much higher than HDL. Most of us have normal-to-high levels of LDL and low levels of HDL.

When too much LDL circulates in the blood, it can slowly build up in the walls of the arteries that feed the heart and brain. Together with other substances, it can form plaques and atherosclerosis. If a clot forms and blocks a narrowed artery, it can cause a heart attack or stroke.

You can change the levels of both LDL and HDL through your diet. LDL is created in response to saturated, hydrogenated and partially hydrogenated trans fats. HDL is created in response to mono and polyunsaturated fats. If you want to lower your risks of stroke and heart disease, you'll want to decrease your...
intake of saturated fats while increasing your intake of mono and polyunsaturated fats.

The bad stuff
Saturated fats are usually solid at room temperature. When consumed in excess, foods high in saturated fat can promote inflammatory disease, cardiovascular disease and cancer. Hydrogenated fats, oils and trans fats are saturated fats created as a result of food manufacturing. Reduce or avoid consuming these harmful oils.

Saturated fats include butter, lard, coconut oil, palm oil, palm kernel oil, cocoa butter, eggs, cheese, whole and 2-percent-fat milk and ice-cream. Hydrogenated oils and trans fats are prevalent in margarine, shortening, breads, muffins, snacks, cookies and crackers, French fries, donuts and other fried foods.

The good stuff
Monounsaturated oils and polyunsaturated oils are liquid at room temperature. Essential fatty acids (EFAs) are types of polyunsaturated oils and have healing properties crucial for maintaining health. Monounsaturated oils include olive, canola, hazelnut, almond and avocado oils.

There are two types of EFAs: omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids. To maintain overall health, you should consume approximately 10 times more omega-6 than omega-3 fatty acids. Polyunsaturated omega-3 fatty acids include flaxseed and flaxseed oil, as well as oils of cold water fish, such as salmon, mackerel, herring and rainbow trout. Polyunsaturated omega-6 fatty acids can be found in safflower, sunflower and corn oils, as well as pumpkin seed, soybean, walnut, wheat germ, sesame seed and rice bran oil.

By adding a little fiber to every meal, you can also make a big impact on your cholesterol levels. The advice is almost always the same: Eat a diet rich in vegetables, fruits and complex carbohydrates, moderate in protein and in healthy fats, and you increase your odds of living a long and healthy life.

Visit www.massagemag.com/cholesterol to read Erin Zimniewicz Williams’ list of recommended supplements containing polyunsaturated omega-6 fatty acids.

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