

# Stave Off the Statins

4 ways to lower your cholesterol without meds. By Kristin Kirkpatrick, M.S., RDN

If you've been diagnosed with high cholesterol, you have a lot of company. The condition affects about 38% of Americans—and if you count those who don't know they have it, that number may be as high as 70%. Though genetics can play a role, studies show that lifestyle factors also contribute to your risk, so making a few smart changes—like the ones here—could help improve your numbers.

## Feast on Fatty Fish

"We need fat in our diets, but the *type* of fat matters," says Gina Jones, M.S., RDN, LDN, a Cleveland-based dietitian. Unsaturated fats, particularly those found in fatty fish like salmon, mackerel and anchovies, are especially beneficial. A study published in the journal *PLOS One* found that people who consumed at least three servings of these types of fish each week had an increase in "good" HDL cholesterol, which is known to be protective for heart health.

## Go with Your Gut

Research shows that the gut microbiome may have a strong influence on blood lipids. And probiotics—which can increase the number of beneficial bugs you have in your gastrointestinal tract—appear particularly promising. A 2018 meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials found that regular intake of probiotics reduced total cholesterol by an average of 13 mg/dL (a modest but not insignificant amount). While most of the research has used supplements (namely because it's a precise testing method), fermented foods like yogurt, tempeh, sauerkraut and kimchi are also likely beneficial. In one small clinical trial, participants' total cholesterol was reduced by 9 mg/dL, on average, after eating kimchi for just seven days.

## Snack on Some Chocolate-Covered Almonds

While the heart-health benefits of almonds are well established, a recent clinical trial published in the *Journal of the American Heart Association* found that noshing on the nuts with dark chocolate may provide even more benefit. Participants who were given almonds, dark chocolate and cocoa powder as a snack for four weeks saw reductions in their LDL cholesterol (more so than those who ate just almonds), and specifically in small dense LDL, which is more likely to cause atherosclerosis.

## Get Your Om On

Heart-pumping exercise is a common cholesterol fix, but taking time to lower your heart rate through meditation shows promise as well. A 2020 observational study published in the *American Journal of Cardiology* found that people who meditated were 35% less likely to have high cholesterol than those who didn't. The study didn't determine causation, or what type or frequency might be most beneficial, but experts believe that even 5 minutes of mindful meditation a day could help reduce stress and lower heart disease risk.

