

Signs of spring are all around urging us to come out of our cosy, indoor hibernating lifestyle that most of us develop over the cold, short days of Winter. For a lot of us, it's been a period of comfort eating for extra warmth and of course, there's the Christmas and New Year celebrations! But It is a new year and most of us are looking forward to shaking off those extra layers and improving our health and fitness levels so that we can enjoy the best of what spring and Summer has to offer.

In this issue, we are looking at one of the areas that has an impact on our general health and long term well-being. The growing concern about cholesterol levels and what implications they may have. Below is a brief overview on the subject and how diet and herbal medicines can help.

What is cholesterol?

Many of us who are concerned about our cholesterol levels may be overwhelmed with the confusing and often conflicting information available to us, especially if we have been told our cholesterol levels are high and we need to take long term medication. Most of us know that cholesterol is a waxy, fatty substance that can clog up the arteries and that there are two main types, Low Density Lipoprotein (LDL) and High Density Lipoprotein (HDL). Cholesterol, derived from the terms Chol- referring to bile and Sterol- hormone like and has many important functions throughout the body. The right balance is essential for the production of cell membranes, healthy glandular functions, hormone production and for brain, nerve and vascular tissue repair and maintenance. It is produced in the liver and stored as bile salts (cholesterol salts) in the gall bladder ready to be released when partially digested food leaves the stomach and enters the small intestines. Emulsifying bile salts disperse the fat globules so that fat digesting enzymes can get to them and break them down into fatty acids, essential nutrients required by the body for the production of energy or cellular functions.

Are LDL and HDL both a threat to our long term health?

Should we be lowering cholesterol in general, or should we be more specific, making sure we have a healthy balance? LDL has been identified as being the main culprit for furring up the arteries causing the condition 'Atherosclerosis', which if left unchecked, will lead to blocked or partially blocked arteries causing less oxygenated and nutrient rich blood to get to the cells of the bodies vital organs. Lack of oxygen to cells will cause severe pain and/or cell death, for example as in angina, myocardial infarct (heart attack), or stroke. An elevated presence of HDL, on the other hand, has been identified as having the effect of lowering LDL and preventing it's damaging effects. A healthy level of cholesterol has been estimated at 1 part HDL to 3 parts total cholesterol. It has also been found that If cholesterol levels are too low it can lead to depression, low mood and aggression. Certain drugs such as Statins lower both LDL and HDL levels, which is a cause for concern bearing in mind the body's need for cholesterol in the right balance to carry out the vital functions as discussed above.

What can you do to help to maintain healthy cholesterol levels?

There is a strong argument that suggests higher levels of cholesterol in the blood may indicate that there are tissues in the body in need of repair. Weakened and leaking artery walls, for example are repaired by cholesterol. Unfortunately, this may lead to a build up of LDL in that area. Smoking and damage by free radicals causes narrowing and damage to the blood vessel walls. Antioxidants, Vitamin C supplements and herbs such as buckwheat and hawthorn (prescribed by a medical herbalist) are known to strengthen fragile blood vessels and improve their elasticity and also help to prevent further damage, which may lead to lower cholesterol levels.

Niacin, Vit B3, for example found in marmite®, oily fish, chicken wheat bran has shown to raise HDL and lower LDL.

Essential Fatty Acids, EFAs including Omega 3, 6 and 9, found in seeds, nuts and oily fish have cholesterol lowering effects whereas saturated fatty acids, SFAs found in animal fats, dairy products have been found to raise cholesterol. EFA's have also been found to decrease the risk of thrombosis, another risk that increases with atherosclerosis. Garlic and onions have also been found to lower harmful cholesterol levels and lower the risks of thrombosis, although patients taking prescribed medicines to 'thin the blood' should contact a herbalist or nutritionist for advice before taking garlic supplements.

The longer it takes for food to move through the digestive tract, the more cholesterol can be reabsorbed back in to the bloodstream. Foods that are higher in naturally occurring fibre, help to move the digested food along the digestive tract by holding onto some of the water and keeping it bulky It also hold onto more of the cholesterol content increasing cholesterol excretion. Therefore, eating foods such as Whole grain, Oats, barley, rye apples, pears, berries, peas, beans, and green leafy vegetables, carrots, and sweet potatoes will help to lower cholesterol. Certain herbs stimulate a sluggish liver and gall bladder to produce and release bile more efficiently which may also increase transit through the bowel.

Of course regular exercise will help to keep your heart and blood vessels healthy, but remember, if you have been diagnosed with hyperlipaemia, high blood cholesterol, high blood pressure, or experiencing pain in the chest, palpitations or shortness of breath, make sure you get medical advice before embarking on any strenuous exercise.



Avena sativa
Oats.
Found to lower cholesterol.



Globe Artichoke. Increases bile production.

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Cost for initial consultation will be £35 (1 hour), or approximately £55 including medicines

Follow-up consultations will be £20 (1/2 hour), or approximately £38 including medicines.

Please make sure you contact a registered Medical Herbalist before taking any Herbal Preparations.