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9 ways to increase your HDL cholesterol levels



Medically reviewed by [Marina Basina, M.D.](#) — By Franziska Spritzler —
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High-density lipoprotein (HDL) is sometimes known as “good” cholesterol. Ways of boosting HDL levels include exercise, consuming olive oil and other healthy fats, and following a keto diet.

Having high HDL levels helps carry [cholesterol](#) from the arteries to the liver, where the body can use it or excrete it.

Having high levels of HDL also has [antioxidant](#) and anti-inflammatory effects, and research has also linked this to a reduced risk of [heart disease](#) (1 [👍](#), 2 [👍](#)).

Most health experts recommend minimum blood levels of 40 milligrams per deciliter (mg/dl) in men and 50 mg/dl in women (3 [👍](#)).

While genetics definitely play a role, there are several other factors that affect HDL levels.

Here are nine healthful ways to raise HDL cholesterol.

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1. Consume olive oil



Including olive oil in the diet is one possible way to increase HDL cholesterol levels.

[Olive oil](#) is one of the most healthful fats around.

A large analysis of 42 studies with more than 800,000 participants found that olive oil was the only source of monounsaturated fat that seemed to reduce heart disease risk ([4](#)).

Research has also shown that one of olive oil's heart-healthy effects is an increase in HDL cholesterol. This may be because it contains antioxidants called polyphenols ([5](#), [6](#), [7](#)).

Extra virgin olive oil has more polyphenols than processed olive oils, although the amount can still vary among different types and brands.

One study gave 200 healthy young males about 2 tablespoons (tbsp) (25 milliliters [ml]) of different olive oils per day for 3 weeks.

The researchers found that participants' HDL levels increased significantly more after they consumed the olive oil with the highest polyphenol content ([6](#)).

In another study, when 62 older adults consumed about 4 tbsp (50 ml) of high polyphenol extra virgin olive oil every day for 6 weeks, their HDL

cholesterol increased (7).

In addition to raising HDL levels, in studies involving older people and individuals with high cholesterol, olive oil also boosted HDL's anti-inflammatory and antioxidant functions (7, 8, 9).

Whenever possible, select high quality, certified extra virgin olive oils, which tend to be highest in polyphenols.

Bottom line: Extra virgin olive oil with a high polyphenol content may increase HDL levels in healthy people, older adults, and individuals with high cholesterol. [Extra virgin olive oil is available to purchase online.](#)

2. Follow a low carb or ketogenic diet

Low carb and [ketogenic diets](#) provide a number of health benefits, including weight loss and reduced blood sugar levels.

Research also shows that they can increase HDL cholesterol in people who tend to have lower levels.

This includes people with [obesity](#), [insulin resistance](#), or [diabetes](#) (10, 11, 12, 13).

In one study, researchers split people with [type 2 diabetes](#) into two groups. One group followed a diet containing fewer than 50 grams (g) of carbs per day. The other group followed a high carb diet.

Although both groups lost weight, the low carb group's HDL cholesterol increased almost twice as much as the high carb group's did (10).

In another study, people with obesity who followed a low carb diet experienced an increase in HDL cholesterol of 5 mg/dl overall.

On the other hand, in the same study, the participants who ate a low fat, high carb diet showed a decrease in HDL cholesterol (13).

This response may partially be because people with low carb diets typically eat higher levels of fat.

One study in women with overweight found that diets high in meat and cheese increased HDL levels by 5–8%, compared with a higher carb diet (14).

It is important to note that the Danish Dairy Research Foundation funded this study, which could have influenced study results.



What's more, these studies demonstrate that in addition to raising HDL cholesterol, very-low-carb diets may decrease triglycerides and improve several other risk factors for heart disease.


Bottom line: Low carb and ketogenic diets typically increase HDL cholesterol levels in people with diabetes and obesity.

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3. Exercise regularly


Being physically active is important for heart health.

Studies have shown that many types of exercise — including strength training, high intensity exercise, and aerobic exercise — are effective at raising HDL cholesterol ([15](#), [16](#) , [17](#) ).

Review studies also say that exercise can boost the antioxidant and anti-inflammatory effects of HDL cholesterol ([18](#) ).

The biggest increases in HDL typically occur with high intensity exercise.

One small study followed females with [polycystic ovary syndrome](#), which can raise the risk of insulin resistance. The study required them to perform high intensity exercise three times per week.

The exercise led to an increase in HDL cholesterol after 10 weeks. The participants also showed improvements in other health markers, including decreased insulin resistance and improved arterial function ([17](#) ).

Even lower intensity exercise seems to increase HDL's anti-inflammatory and antioxidant capacities, though it is not clear whether exercise volume or exercise intensity makes the most difference ([19](#)).

Overall, high intensity exercise such as [high intensity interval training](#) and high intensity circuit training may boost HDL cholesterol levels the most.

Bottom line: Exercising several times per week can help raise HDL cholesterol and enhance its anti-inflammatory and antioxidant effects. High intensity forms of exercise may be especially effective.

4. Add coconut oil to the diet

Studies have shown that [coconut oil](#) may reduce appetite, increase metabolic rate, and help protect brain health, among other benefits.

Some people may be concerned about coconut oil's effects on heart health due to its high saturated fat content. However, it appears that coconut oil is actually quite heart-healthy.

Some studies have shown that coconut oil tends to raise HDL cholesterol more than many other types of fat.

In addition, some studies have shown that coconut oil may improve the ratio of low-density lipoprotein (LDL), or "bad," cholesterol to HDL cholesterol. Improving this ratio reduces heart disease risk ([20](#), [21](#), [22](#)).

One study examined the health effects of coconut oil consumption in 40 females with excess abdominal fat. The researchers found that those who took coconut oil daily had increased HDL cholesterol and a lower LDL-to-HDL ratio.

In contrast, the group who took soybean oil daily had a decrease in HDL cholesterol and an increase in the LDL-to-HDL ratio ([21](#)).

However, more recent reviews suggest that the research into coconut oil and cholesterol is of poor quality, is not conclusive, and often reports that coconut oil can raise the levels of LDL cholesterol. Therefore, more research is needed ([23](#), [24](#)).

Most studies have found that these health benefits occur at a dosage of about 2 tbsp (30 ml) of coconut oil per day. It is best to incorporate this into cooking rather than eating spoonfuls of coconut oil on their own.

Bottom line: Consuming 2 tbsp (30 ml) of coconut oil per day may help increase HDL cholesterol levels. [Coconut oil is available to purchase online](#). That said, the current research is inconclusive.

5. Quit smoking

Smoking increases the risk of many health problems, including heart disease and [lung cancer](#).

One of its negative effects is a suppression of HDL cholesterol. Some studies have found that [quitting smoking](#) can increase HDL levels ([25](#), [26](#), [27](#)).

In a 1-year study of more than 1,500 people, those who quit smoking had twice the increase in HDL as those who resumed smoking within the year. The number of large HDL particles also increased, which further reduced heart disease risk ([26](#)).

When it comes to the effect of nicotine replacement patches on HDL levels, research results have been mixed.

For example, one study found that nicotine replacement therapy led to higher HDL cholesterol. However, other research suggests that people who use nicotine patches likely will not see increases in HDL levels until after replacement therapy ends ([28](#), [29](#)).

Even in studies where HDL cholesterol levels did not increase after people quit smoking, HDL function improved, resulting in less [inflammation](#) and other beneficial effects on heart health ([30](#)).

Bottom line: Quitting smoking can increase HDL levels, improve HDL function, and help protect heart health.



6. Lose weight

When people with overweight or obesity lose weight, their HDL cholesterol levels usually increase.

What's more, this benefit seems to occur whether weight loss is from a calorie-reduced diet, carb restriction, intermittent fasting, weight loss surgery, or a combination of diet and exercise ([13](#), [31](#), [32](#), [33](#), [34](#), [35](#)).

One study examined HDL levels in more than 3,000 Japanese adults with overweight or obesity, all of whom followed a lifestyle modification program for 1 year.

The researchers found that losing 1–3% of [body weight](#) resulted in significant increases in HDL cholesterol ([34](#)).

In another study, when people with obesity and type 2 diabetes consumed calorie-restricted diets that provided 20–30% of [calories](#) from protein, they had significant increases in HDL cholesterol levels ([35](#)).

The key to achieving and maintaining healthy HDL cholesterol levels is choosing the type of diet that makes it easiest for the individual to lose

weight and keep it off.

Bottom line: Research shows that several methods of weight loss can increase HDL cholesterol levels in people with overweight or obesity.



7. Choose purple produce

Consuming purple fruits and vegetables is a delicious way to potentially increase HDL cholesterol.

Purple produce contains antioxidants known as anthocyanins.

Studies using anthocyanin extracts have shown that they help fight inflammation, protect the cells from damaging free radicals, and potentially raise HDL cholesterol levels ([36](#), [37](#), [38](#), [39](#)).

In a 24-week study of 58 people with diabetes, those who took an anthocyanin supplement twice per day had a 19.4% increase in HDL cholesterol, on average, along with other improvements in heart health markers ([38](#)).

In another study, when people with cholesterol-related issues took anthocyanin extract for 12 weeks, their HDL cholesterol levels increased by 13.7% ([39](#)).

Although these studies used extracts instead of foods, several fruits and vegetables are very high in anthocyanins. These include:

- eggplant
- red cabbage
- [blueberries](#)
- blackberries
- black raspberries

Bottom line: Consuming fruits and vegetables rich in anthocyanins may help increase HDL cholesterol levels.

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8. Eat fatty fish often

The [omega-3 fats](#) in [fatty fish](#) provide benefits to heart health, including a reduction in inflammation and better functioning of the cells that line the arteries ([40](#), [41](#)).

Some research suggests that eating fatty fish or taking [fish oil](#) supplements may also help raise low levels of HDL cholesterol ([42](#), [43](#)).

In a study of 33 people with heart disease, participants who consumed fatty fish four times per week for 8 weeks had an increase in HDL cholesterol levels. The particle size of their HDL also increased ([44](#)).

However, other studies found no increase in HDL cholesterol in response to increased fish or omega-3 supplement intake ([40](#)).

Some types of fatty fish that may help raise HDL cholesterol include:

- salmon
- herring
- sardines
- mackerel
- anchovies

Bottom line: Eating fatty fish several times per week may help increase HDL cholesterol levels and provide other benefits to heart health.

9. Avoid artificial trans fats

Artificial trans fats have many negative health effects due to their inflammatory properties ([45](#), [46](#)).

There are two types of trans fats. One kind occurs naturally in animal products, including full fat dairy.

In contrast, manufacturers create artificial trans fats, which are present in margarines and processed foods, by adding hydrogen to unsaturated vegetable and seed oils. These fats are also known as industrial trans fats or partially hydrogenated fats.

In addition to increasing inflammation and contributing to several health concerns, these artificial trans fats may lower HDL cholesterol levels.

To protect heart health and keep HDL cholesterol within the healthful range, it is best to avoid artificial trans fats altogether.

Bottom line: Research suggests that artificial trans fats can lower HDL levels and increase inflammation compared with other fats.

Frequently asked questions

The following are answers to frequently asked questions.

What is a good HDL and LDL level?

Most health [experts recommend](#) minimum HDL blood levels of 40 milligrams per deciliter (mg/dl) in males and 50 mg/dl in females. Optimal LDL level is generally considered to be [less than](#) 100 mg/dl but lower targets of less than 70 mg/dl are recommended for individuals with a high risk of heart disease or with personal history of heart disease.

What is a healthy HDL level by age?

Individual targets vary from person to person, but there are [general guidelines](#) to be aware of. In adults 20 and older, healthy levels are at or above 40 mg/dl for males and 50 mg/dl for females. For those 19 and younger, 45 mg/dl or higher is considered ideal.

What happens if your HDL is low?

HDL helps transport cholesterol from the arteries to the liver, where it can be metabolized and excreted. If HDL levels are low, the body cannot efficiently get rid of cholesterol, which can lead up to a buildup of plaque in the arteries. This can increase the risk of heart disease.

Is HDL cholesterol good or bad cholesterol?

HDL is known as “good” cholesterol. LDL is commonly referred to as “bad” cholesterol.

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Summary

Although HDL cholesterol levels are partly determined by genetics, there are many things a person can do to naturally increase their levels.

This includes eating healthful fats, such as olive oil, coconut oil, and fatty fish, and avoiding harmful trans fats. Getting regular exercise, quitting smoking, and eating antioxidant-rich foods are also effective for increasing HDL cholesterol.

The habits and practices that raise HDL cholesterol often provide other health benefits, and they are key components of a healthful lifestyle.

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