

## HERBAL TREATMENT OF HIGH CHOLESTEROL

Q.

I have been told my cholesterol level is slightly higher than normal. I would like to try herbs before taking statins. What do you suggest?

A. Cholesterol is present in the blood and most body tissues. It is an important part of the membrane (the outer 'shell') of each cell in our bodies and is necessary to make steroid hormones. Statins are drugs that interfere with cholesterol production in the liver and reduce blood levels. Possible side-effects include muscle pain and weakness, liver damage, insomnia, headache, nausea, indigestion, diarrhoea and stomach cramps. Abnormally high cholesterol levels in the blood can be a factor leading to gallstones and/or diseases of the arteries. Arterial disease could in turn lead to a stroke or heart attack so it's wise to take preventative measures. We may get fatty plaques forming on the walls inside the arteries causing eventual narrowing. The flow of blood is therefore reduced resulting in high blood pressure. Sometimes these plaques break off and a thrombus forms. This could totally block an artery, for example in the heart or lung. As we get older, it's harder for our bodies to get rid of excess fat, including cholesterol, which is a type of fat or lipid. There are different forms of these lipids and it's the low density ones that are thought to be more harmful.

Although **Diet** is not the only factor- some people have a genetic tendency to high cholesterol - it is important to pay attention to what you are eating to help prevent future problems. To avoid damage to your arteries, you can be your own best friend by eating the right foods, getting enough regular exercise and not smoking.

Eat foods high in plant fibre – fresh fruit and vegetables and whole grains, especially barley and oat bran. What about a plate of porridge every morning, plenty of fresh fruit snacks and a bowl of homemade scotch broth made with barley, beans and vegetables? Eating two raw carrots a day has been shown to lower cholesterol and, along with beans and lentils, they are high in fibre. Reducing sugar, coffee and animal fats and including oily fish and, perhaps surprisingly, nuts (unsalted) will help. The type of fat you eat makes a difference and nut oils or cold-pressed vegetable oils such as olive oil are preferable to animal fats. **Garlic, ginger, fenugreek and turmeric** are all plants often used in making curries to spice up your food and they can lower your cholesterol at the same time. **Globe artichoke** has had positive research results in lowering cholesterol.

**Linden (lime flower) tea** is very pleasant tasting and helps to relax you and **Hawthorn berry** tincture (a tincture is a concentrated liquid medicine made from herbs) has been shown to protect against diet-induced high cholesterol.

It is advisable to consult a qualified herbalist before taking herbal remedies, especially if you are pregnant or breast-feeding or taking medication. Ideally, the herbalist would work with you and your G.P. on a treatment plan.

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