

Gone with the Gunk

Fifteen ways to improve your cholesterol profile

IF YOU HAVE high cholesterol, your doctor may suggest that you start taking special prescription drugs even though you have no symptoms of cardiovascular disease. Known as statin drugs, lovastatin (Mevacor), simvastatin (Zocor), and atorvastatin (Lipitor) can shrink your cholesterol levels by up to 40 percent and may reduce your risk of suffering a first heart attack. But before you opt for drug therapy, try lowering your "bad" LDL and raising your "good" HDL naturally with exercise, diet, and supplements.

■ **AEROBIC EXERCISE** It's a fact: Getting at least 30 minutes of moderate aerobic activity three or more times a week elevates HDL. A recent yearlong study at Stanford University found that if you exercise and stick to a low-fat diet, you may enjoy a reduction in LDL of up to 20 points.

■ **ALCOHOL** Though the mechanism remains unclear, alcohol does appear to boost HDL levels. The so-called French Paradox — low rates of heart disease despite a national diet of brie, foie gras, and buttercream pastries — may be due to the red wine served at every meal. Flavonoid antioxidants (see below) in red wine may confer additional cardiac benefits. If you don't imbibe, don't take it up simply for your heart. If you already do, don't exceed two drinks a day.

■ **BENECOL (STANOLS) AND TAKE CONTROL (STEROLS) MARGARINES** Studies conducted in Finland,

the Netherlands, and elsewhere have shown that these margarines can significantly reduce LDL — stanols by up to 14 percent, sterols by up to 10 percent — with no effect on HDL. Stanols and sterols are plant-derived chemicals that closely mimic the structure of cholesterol and fool the intestines into absorbing less of the real stuff. The manufacturers' recommended intake is two tablespoons per day.

■ **CHOLESTALID** The active ingredient in this supplement is alfalfa, which studies at Wayne State University and elsewhere have found significantly lowers cholesterol in animals; unpublished research in Europe suggests it may work for humans, too. The fiber in alfalfa teams with compounds called saponins to bind to dietary cholesterol and bile acids in the intestines, eliminating them through waste. Raw alfalfa, however, also contains two substances (canavanine and coumestrol) that can be toxic. Cholestalid's makers

(Omni Nutraceuticals, 800-808-7266) claim the supplement provides alfalfa's benefits without its drawbacks, thanks to a process that removes the toxins. However, until more research on Cholestalid is published in peer-reviewed journals, David Klurfeld, Ph.D., a leading cholesterol researcher at Wayne State University, cautions buyers to beware.

■ **CHOLESTIN** For more information on this cholesterol-reducing red-yeast supplement, log on to www.pharmanex.com or call 888-742-7626. A one-month supply costs about \$40. Or try candy bars laced with a day's supply of the substance (14 bars cost \$36).

■ **FLAVONOIDS** Found in red wine, tea, apple juice, and chocolate, flavonoids (along with phenols) are antioxidants that many experts believe can inhibit the oxidation of LDL cholesterol into an artery-clogging form. One research team at the University of California at Davis recently found that the phenols in a glass of apple juice inhibit LDL oxidation by 30 percent.

■ **FOLIC ACID (FOLATE)** Folic acid reduces levels of blood homocysteine, an amino-acid byproduct thought to help

form the cells that develop into plaque. Take a daily multivitamin that contains at least 400 mcg of folate. (The Oregon Heart Right, from Bristol-Myers Squibb, delivers 600 mcg, along with other heart-healthy levels of vitamins and minerals; call 800-468-7746.) You can also count on getting at least 200 mcg by eating breads, cereals, and pasta, thanks to the folate fortification of the nation's grain supply, which the FDA mandated in 1996.

■ **L-ARGININE** A 1997 animal study in the medical journal *Circulation* found that oral doses of this amino acid inhibited the formation of plaque more effectively than did lovastatin. More studies are needed to determine how effective this supplement might be.

■ **MONOUNSATURATED FATS** Whenever you can substitute an unsaturated fat for a saturated fat, do so. Saturated fats, like butter and animal fat, interfere with the liver's ability to remove cholesterol from the blood. Researchers say monounsaturated fats such as olive oil and canola oil fight LDL without also decreasing HDL. On the downside, these fats are high in calories. Keep fat calories to less than 30 percent of your daily diet.