Overview of Cholesterol-Lowering Foods

Foods That Lower Cholesterol By reducing our intake of the three things that raise LDL cholesterol– saturated fat, trans fat, and dietary cholesterol– each found concentrated in meat, dairy, eggs, and certain processed foods, most people could achieve an LDL below 70 without drugs for the primary prevention of heart disease, and for those who couldn't, the next step was to add combinations of foods that actively pull cholesterol from our body.

But now that the guidelines have shifted towards the lower, the better across the board, then everyone should not only be lowering their intake of animal products and tropical oils but also going out of their way to add cholesterol-lowering foods to their diet.

We've talked about the Portfolio Diet which emphasizes specific categories of foods that lower cholesterol. How about trying to expand our portfolio?

Nuts and Brazil Nuts for LDL Reduction

Let's start with the Daily Dozen, the healthiest of healthy foods we encourage people to try to fit into their daily routine. The handful of nuts every day covers the Portfolio Diet's nut recommendation, but aim for a little more, closer to a third of a cup (80 g).

Are some nuts better than others? Cashews and walnuts may be best for lowering LDL, with peanuts being least likely to be helpful. Of course, who could forget this study that Dr. Greger featured in his video Four Nuts Once a Month, which showed that a single dose of 20 grams of Brazil nuts, dropped LDL about 20% within 24 hours, and it was still down a month later.

These results suggest that eating just four Brazil nuts might be enough to improve LDL cholesterol levels for up to 30 days. Now, eating Brazil nuts every day may put you at risk for selenium toxicity.

Legumes and Black Soybeans

Just one high-selenium Brazil nut a day can increase the expression of pro-inflammatory genes, whereas if you have just the single serving of four nuts a month, you get a nice drop in inflammatory markers in your bloodstream within 24 hours with the benefits still evident a month later.

So, I'm going to add that in addition to getting your daily handful of other nuts. The three daily servings of legumes will help cover the plant-protein requirement in the Portfolio Diet, but is there a best bean?

In the 10th anniversary edition of How Not to Die, Dr. Greger added black soybeans, because the berry-like pigments found in the equivalent of just a tablespoon a day of black soybeans dropped LDL cholesterol by 14 points over placebo within eight weeks; so, let's add that in.

You can buy them canned with no salt added or cook dried beans from scratch in 45 minutes in an electric pressure cooker like an Instant Pot. One teaspoon dried equals about one tablespoon cooked.

Viscous Fiber and Phytosterols

So, you could cook two-thirds of a cup of beans (130 g) once a month and keep them in the freezer in silicone ice trays and pop out a clump every day for the daily tablespoon.

Or, a single can will cover you for 28 days using the same drain/freeze/defrost method. The other two components of the Portfolio Diet are 20 grams of viscous fiber and two grams of phytosterols.

Without even trying, the Daily Dozen should get you about 14 grams of viscous fiber. To make up for any gap, you can choose particularly rich sources of each.

So, consider black beans, blackberries, apples, and oranges; okra, eggplant, sweet potatoes; oats and barley. Or, you can add a tablespoon of psyllium husk powder to your daily diet, which has six grams of viscous fiber to make it up to the 20 grams in the Portfolio Diet.

Just make sure you take it as directed with lots of water. For more on psyllium, see Dr. Greger's video on cholesterol-lowering supplements.

Special Fruits and Dried Apples

To complete the Portfolio Diet's combo, add phytosterol supplements too, as Dr. Greger details in this video, which concludes a three-video series on the subject.

In addition to the special beans and Brazil nuts, there are special berries. Two tablespoons a day of barberries should get you the 900 mg of berberine Dr. Greger talked about before, though don't take them while pregnant or breastfeeding.

Also, add 100 grams of artichoke hearts, which match the cholesterol-lowering doses of artichoke extracts. You can get artichoke hearts salt-free in the frozen section.

Any other fruits proven in randomized controlled trials to lower LDL? Dried figs flopped, as did a mixture of dried fruits. But half a dozen randomized controlled trials found that prunes, an average of seven a day, can drop LDL by 20 points.

But in 2024, the Prune Study was published, the largest prune study to date. After a year of eating up to 10 or 11 prunes a day, no benefit for cholesterol.

Flaxseed and Next Topics

That's a lot of prunes for no benefit, but daily dried apples can drop LDL as much as 24%; so, consider adding two medium-sized apples or about a dozen dried apple rings as two of your three servings of other fruits.

We recommend a tablespoon of ground flaxseed in the Daily Dozen. Based on dozens of randomized controlled trials involving thousands of study participants, flaxseeds themselves can lower LDL, but the smallest effective dose I could find in a controlled trial was 20 grams, which is three tablespoons of ground flaxseeds.

So, I'm going to add two extra checkboxes for cholesterol-lowering purposes. What about herbs and spices that lower cholesterol? We'll cover them, next.