

# 4 Lifestyle Changes That Lower Bad Cholesterol Better Than Statins

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## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Nearly 40 million Americans take statins daily, yet these drugs don't fix the root cause of high cholesterol and often cause serious side effects like muscle pain and insulin resistance
- › Dr. Adriana Quinones-Camacho, a cardiologist at NYU Langone Health, recommends lifestyle changes — like eating clean fats, exercising, and losing weight — as first-line treatments before resorting to risky cholesterol-lowering medications
- › Eliminating processed seed oils and consuming whole-food omega-3s from fatty fish (in optimal amounts) will help improve your lipid profile and support natural cholesterol clearance through liver and cell function
- › Excess weight raises low-density lipoprotein (LDL) levels and leads to plaque buildup in arteries; reducing sugar, increasing fiber, and adding daily movement reverses this damage and promotes long-term cardiovascular health
- › Statins are linked to diabetes, cataracts, muscle breakdown, and depleted CoQ10, making lifestyle changes not only safer but also more effective for lasting heart and metabolic health

According to the American Heart Association, around 40 million American adults are now taking statins to manage their high cholesterol.<sup>1</sup> These medications work by blocking an enzyme in the liver that's responsible for producing cholesterol, reducing your blood cholesterol levels.

However, statins actually do more harm than good – Not only do they fail to address the root cause of heart disease, but they also expose you to various detrimental side effects (more on this later).

The good news is that there are ways to manage your cholesterol levels without relying on statins. In an article in the *Hearty Soul*, Dr. Adriana Quinones-Camacho, a cardiologist at NYU Langone Health, says that implementing four lifestyle changes can help protect your heart health better. She discusses strategies that are advised by cardiologists, saying that physicians must recommend these to their patients before resorting to prescribe statins.<sup>2</sup>

## 1. Be Physically Active

Quinones-Camacho says that making time for exercise is essential if you want to manage your cholesterol levels. Numerous studies support this; in fact, a 2013 paper published in *Sports Medicine*<sup>3</sup> notes that almost any type of exercise can have a significant impact on cholesterol.<sup>4</sup>

- **Exercise boosts your “good” cholesterol levels** – According to Quinones-Camacho, moderate-intensity workouts help improve the production of high-density lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol, also known as “good” cholesterol.
- **Aerobics and strength training are also helpful** – A separate study also found that combining these two types of exercises helps improve lipid profiles and overall metabolic health.<sup>5</sup>
- **You don’t need a gym membership** – Taking a brisk walk at lunch, riding a bike to work, or getting into a sport you’re interested in are some great ways to stay physically active.
- **What’s the recommended amount?** Ideally, aim for at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity workouts five days per week, or 20 minutes of high-intensity exercise three times weekly.

- **Avoid being sedentary** – Rather, make sure to incorporate short bursts of movement throughout the day. This will help burn calories and improve your cholesterol profile. Quinones-Camacho also advises joining support groups or fostering friendships to keep you motivated to workout.

## 2. Lose Excess Weight

Quinones-Camacho notes that excess weight leads to higher low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol levels – this is often referred to as "bad" cholesterol, as it builds up in the walls of your arteries, leading to plaque formation.

- **Plaque leads to atherosclerosis** – Plaque buildup narrows and hardens your arteries, restricting blood flow to your heart, brain, and other vital organs. This increases your risk of heart disease, heart attacks, and stroke.
- **Manage your weight with small yet impactful lifestyle changes** – “Changing your diet to cut out unnecessary calories, boost your activities in your routine and increasing standing activities such as yardwork, are some strategies to aid in weight loss,” The Hearty Soul article notes.

## 3. Consume the Right Fats

Quinones-Camacho notes that the type of fats you eat affects your cholesterol levels. Although there's some truth to this, she lumps together trans fats and saturated fats, advising to limit them both.

While trans fats are particularly harmful – especially partially hydrogenated vegetable oils, which are loaded with **linoleic acid (LA)** – and are best eliminated from your diet, I do not agree with avoiding saturated fats, as they actually help you maintain healthy cholesterol levels while supporting your overall heart health.

- **Saturated fats have been wrongly vilified to cause high cholesterol** – For decades, you've been told that eating saturated fat raises your cholesterol levels, particularly LDL cholesterol. However, the relationship between saturated fat intake and cholesterol levels is far more complex than previously thought.
- **When you consume saturated fat, it doesn't directly impact your cholesterol production** – Your body processes fats in your digestive system, breaking them down and packaging them into chylomicrons – large lipoproteins that transport fats throughout your body.
- **Meanwhile, cholesterol production occurs separately in every cell of your body, with your liver playing a significant role** – The idea that eating saturated fat automatically raises cholesterol levels is an oversimplification that doesn't align with the complex biochemical processes in your body.

She also advises getting enough omega-3 fats. However, although omega-3s promote heart health, there are certain considerations to be mindful of.

- **It's not simply about consuming omega-3s** – The quantity, the type, and the quality of what you consume also matter. Since omega-3s are a type of polyunsaturated fat (PUF), moderation is key. Think of omega-3 consumption as a balancing act; too little is detrimental, but too much also poses risks, albeit through different mechanisms.
- **Excessive omega-3 intake could negatively impact heart health** – When you rely on getting omega-3s from certain supplements, it could contribute to atrial fibrillation (AFib). AFib leads to complications such as blood clots, strokes, heart failure, and other serious cardiovascular problems.
- **Omega-3s affect your cell membranes** – Each cell in the body is enclosed by a protective barrier called the cell membrane. This membrane is like a fluid composed of various fats, including omega-3s and omega-6s. When you consume omega-3s, they become incorporated into these membranes, altering their fluidity.

One theory suggests that an overabundance of omega-3s makes the cell membrane excessively fluid disrupting the function of ion channels, particularly a channel known as the Piezo channel. This interferes with the normal electrical signaling of the cell, thereby triggering an irregular heartbeat.

- **Quality and quantity are key to ensure omega-3 fats are beneficial, not harmful** – Prioritize whole food sources such as wild-caught fatty fish like Alaskan salmon, sardines, anchovies, mackerel, and herring, which provide omega-3s in their natural form along with other essential nutrients.

When supplementing, opt for krill oil or phospholipid-form fish oil for better absorption. Choose reputable brands that prioritize quality and purity, and start with lower doses, increasing them only under medical guidance.

## 4. Eat More Fiber and Less Processed Sugar

Lastly, Quinones-Camacho recommends consuming fiber, as it “binds to cholesterol in the digestive system and prevents its absorption into the bloodstream,” while limiting your sugar intake.<sup>6</sup> She says this dual strategy not only contributes to optimal weight management but also improves your lipid profile.

- **Refined sugar and carbohydrates increase inflammation** – Once eaten, these chemicals trigger a release of insulin, promoting the accumulation of fat and the creation of triglycerides (a type of fat found in your blood, which is a valuable indicator of your overall health) making it more difficult for you to lose weight or maintain your normal weight.
- **Some experts argue that insulin resistance, not high LDL, is the primary driver of heart disease** – Insulin resistance leads to a decline in your mitochondrial energy production, and this poor mitochondrial health underlies heart disease and many other chronic conditions.

- **Consuming fiber-rich foods leads to a significant decline in LDL levels** – I recommend getting both soluble and insoluble fiber, from foods like whole fruits like apples, fresh vegetables like broccoli, Brussels sprouts, and cauliflower, prunes, beans, and whole grains.

## **Is Lower Cholesterol Really a Good Thing?**

You've been told that high cholesterol is bad and low cholesterol is good for your heart health. But the fact is that low cholesterol could be harmful as well, especially with recent research providing more evidence into cholesterol's significant role in our bodies.

- **Cholesterol is a crucial component of cell membranes and a precursor to many important hormones** – It's not just a harmful substance to be eliminated, but a vital part of our biology. In fact, cholesterol plays a key role in brain function, hormone production, and even vitamin D synthesis.
- **The conventional advice to lower cholesterol levels to prevent heart disease is based on flawed studies** – This included research like the Framingham Heart Study, which linked high cholesterol to increased cardiovascular risk. As a result, millions of people have been prescribed statins and told to follow low-fat diets. However, new research is challenging this simplistic view.
- **The REasons for Geographic and Racial Differences in Stroke (REGARDS) study provides new insights** – Published in the Journal of the American College of Cardiology, this study examined data from 23,901 participants over a median follow-up of 10.7 years. The researchers found that the relationship between HDL cholesterol and heart disease risk actually varied depending on race.<sup>7</sup>

Low levels of high-density lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol were only associated with increased risk of coronary heart disease in White adults. Even more surprisingly, high levels of HDL cholesterol didn't seem to protect against heart disease in either White or Black adults.

- **This revelation challenges decades of medical advice** – It goes against the advice to raise HDL cholesterol levels to improve heart health. The study also highlights the importance of considering racial differences in health research and treatment recommendations.
- **Individual genetics also play a big part in how our bodies handle cholesterol** – Some people naturally make more cholesterol, while others make less. This is why two people eating the same diet could have very different cholesterol levels.<sup>8</sup>
- **The "cholesterol paradox" is another intriguing discovery** – In some cases, individuals with low cholesterol levels actually had worse health outcomes than those with higher levels – a finding that flies in the face of long-held beliefs about cholesterol and health. As noted in one 2023 scientific review:

*"On average, patients with a total cholesterol level of 232 mg/dl had a 25% higher survival rate than those with a total cholesterol level of 193 mg/dl who were suffering from heart failure. A total cholesterol level under 200 mg/dl is generally preferred."<sup>9</sup>*

These unexpected results raise important questions about how we assess cardiovascular risk and whether current treatment guidelines are appropriate for all populations. Clearly, the relationship between cholesterol and health isn't nearly as straightforward as we once thought. For more information, read "[Low Cholesterol Dangers Exposed; Heart Health Myths Shattered.](#)"

## **Just Say 'No' to Statins**

Although there are specific points that need to be rectified, Quinones-Camacho's recommendations are generally a step in the right direction. These four strategies address the underlying and foundational causes of high cholesterol, which is far better than taking statins.

I personally would never take or prescribe a statin drug; apart from failing to derail the rising trend of heart disease, they also put you at risk of certain conditions, including:

- **Myopathy** – Some individuals taking statins experience muscle pain or weakness; these muscular issues are thought to stem from mitochondrial dysfunction and alterations in muscle protein metabolism.<sup>10</sup>
- **Type 2 diabetes** – A 2024 Lancet study confirmed that statins increase diabetes risk, with high-intensity statins raising the risk by 36%.<sup>11</sup>
- **Cataracts** – Statins increase cataract risk by interfering with cholesterol biosynthesis in the lens epithelium. One study found that 1.9% of coronary artery disease patients underwent cataract surgery during a three-year follow-up period.<sup>12</sup> Read more here: [“Statins Raise Glaucoma Risk.”](#)
- **Pancreatic cancer** – Long-term use of anticholesterol drugs, around five years or more, has been linked to an increased risk of this condition.<sup>13</sup>

In addition, statins deplete your CoQ10 levels, as they work to block HMG coenzyme A reductase in your liver, which is how they reduce cholesterol. HMG coenzyme A also produces CoQ10. However, your body requires CoQ10, as it is an essential mitochondrial nutrient that facilitates ATP production.

By impairing your mitochondrial function, statins could affect any number of health problems, as without well-functioning mitochondria, your risk for chronic disease increases significantly. Learn more by reading [“CoQ10 Is Key for Cellular Energy and Cancer Support.”](#)

## Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) About Lifestyle Changes to Lower Cholesterol

**Q: What are the four lifestyle changes that help lower bad cholesterol better than**

**statins?**

**A:** The most effective changes include eating the right fats, cutting processed sugar and consuming enough fiber, increasing daily movement, and losing excess weight. These address the root causes of high LDL and improve heart health naturally.

**Q: Why are statins not the best first option for managing cholesterol?**

**A:** Statins don't treat the root cause of high cholesterol and often cause side effects like muscle pain, insulin resistance, and CoQ10 depletion, which impairs energy production and increases disease risk.

**Q: How does exercise impact cholesterol levels?**

**A:** Regular movement boosts HDL ("good" cholesterol), helps clear LDL from the bloodstream, improves insulin sensitivity, and reduces inflammation – all without needing a gym or intense workouts.

**Q: Are all fats bad for cholesterol?**

**A:** No. Processed seed oils and trans fats raise LDL cholesterol and damage your arteries, but saturated fats from clean sources and omega-3s from wild fish support healthy cholesterol levels and cellular function.

**Q: How does fiber help lower cholesterol?**

**A:** Soluble fiber binds to cholesterol in your gut, stopping it from being absorbed into your bloodstream. Eating whole fruits, vegetables, and whole grains daily is a powerful way to naturally lower LDL.

## Sources and References

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