It’s no secret that the United States could stand to collectively shed a few pounds. More than two-thirds of American adults are overweight or obese.

But a few months ago, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released a bit of good news. Although Americans’ waistlines are expanding, cholesterol levels are actually going down.

According to the CDC, 13.4 percent of American adults now have high total cholesterol (higher than 240 mg/dL) compared with 18.3 percent a few years ago. High total cholesterol is a risk factor for coronary heart disease.

Cholesterol, a fat-like substance in the blood, is needed to function properly. But having too much can cause plaque buildup in the arteries, which can lead to heart disease.

But the decrease in cholesterol levels doesn’t mean Americans, who suffer more than a million heart attacks each year, should breathe easy:

“There is good news, but we are not out of the woods,” says Dr. Nathan Wong, director of the University of California, Irvine Heart Disease Prevention Program and immediate past president of the American Society for Preventive Cardiology. “There are many other risk factors for heart disease, particularly elevated obesity.”

Cholesterol, says Wong, is just one piece of the puzzle when dealing with a person’s heart health.

“A patient’s cholesterol levels might be under control, but other risk factors may not be,” Wong says. “Blood pressure or blood glucose numbers, for instance, might be high.”

Video Spotlight:
How Cholesterol Management Can Help Prevent Stroke and Heart Disease
How High Cholesterol Harms You
While many people can control cholesterol levels with a heart-healthy lifestyle, Wong says he has no doubt that statins, which have been on the U.S. market for 20 years, have contributed to lower cholesterol levels. He also suspects that more people are avoiding high-fat foods — especially red meat — that have contributed to high cholesterol levels. But, he cautions, there is still significant room for improvement.

“Calorie consumption is not ideal, physical activity levels are not ideal,” Wong says. “Portion sizes continue to get bigger and obesity is still on the rise.”

The American Heart Association’s campaign, Life’s Simple 7, promotes getting active, controlling cholesterol, losing weight, eating better, lowering blood pressure and quitting smoking. Wong suggests everyone follow its rules to help keep heart disease at bay. Learn more about the program at mylifecheck.heart.org.

How Soluble Fiber Affects Your Cholesterol

Soluble fiber is where it’s at for helping to get your cholesterol under control. Check out sources and ideas for how to include this fiber in your diet.

If you have high cholesterol, your doctor has likely told you to follow a heart-healthy diet. Aside from cutting back on dietary cholesterol, unhealthy fats and salt, you were probably also told to increase your fiber intake.

But how much fiber? And what type of fiber is best for helping to get your cholesterol under control?

Soluble fiber to the rescue

There are two main types of fiber: insoluble and soluble. Both have health benefits, but only soluble fiber lowers the risk of heart disease. Soluble fiber dissolves into a gel-like substance in the intestines. This helps to block cholesterol (specifically, “bad” LDL) from being absorbed. Soluble fiber can also help to regulate blood sugar for people with diabetes.

Research has shown that people who raise their soluble fiber intake by 5 grams to 10 grams a day have about a 5 percent drop in their LDL cholesterol. And eating as much as 10 g to 25 g a day can lower your LDL even more.

Most foods have a combination of both types of fiber. Because food sources vary greatly, choose soluble fiber foods carefully to get the highest amount possible.

Fiber grams in foods

Not sure how much fiber you’re getting from food? The following list can help you plan how to fill your daily quota, and offers soluble fiber amounts along with the total fiber.

Remember, your goal is to aim for at least 5 g to 10 g of soluble, and a total of at least 25 g to 30 g (or more) of total fiber per day.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Whole-grain cereals (1/2 cup cooked)</th>
<th>Soluble</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Barley</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oatmeal</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oat bran</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psyllium seeds (1 Tbs)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fruit: 1 medium (except where noted)

| Apple                                | 1       | 4     |
Getting your daily dose

As always, the trick is to find ways to work these delicious foods into your everyday meal plan. Here are some tips to get you started.

- Have a bowl of oatmeal or oat bran for breakfast or a mid-afternoon snack. Add walnuts for crunch, plus a dash of cinnamon and a teaspoon of maple syrup for flavor.
- Mix psyllium seeds into oatmeal, a smoothie or yogurt.
- Make a split pea or lentil soup on the weekend and serve for lunch or dinner.
- Rinse off canned kidney beans and add a half cup to your salad.
- Toast cooked garbanzo beans and eat as a snack.
- Mix black, Lima or pinto beans into rice for a tasty side dish.
- Add barley to soups instead of pasta.
- Snack on high soluble fiber fruits such as oranges, grapefruits, pears and apples.
- Add banana to your morning cereal.
- Mix prunes into oatmeal for breakfast or simply snack on them with a handful of walnuts.
- Saute Brussels sprouts in a pinch of olive oil and garlic and add a dash of salt, pepper and Parmesan cheese to taste.

Finally, remember that many commercial oat bran products (muffins, chips, waffles) actually contain very little fiber. They may also be high in sodium, total fat, saturated and trans fat. Make sure to read the labels on all packaged foods before you make your selection.
Those pills for your blood pressure or cholesterol may be a pain to remember. Besides, you feel fine. So why bother taking them?

Well, for a very good reason. According to the American Heart Association, tens of thousands of deaths, hospital admissions and slow recoveries from illness each year result from people not following their doctors’ advice.

Just because high blood pressure and high cholesterol have no symptoms doesn't mean you don’t need medication. Remember that high blood pressure does not have a cure. So if you’re on medication for it, you’ll probably need to stay on it for the rest of your life.

Medications to lower blood pressure and cholesterol can help you avoid a heart attack or stroke by slowing down the progression of hardening of the arteries (atherosclerosis) and even reversing some of its harmful effects. The drugs may not change the way you feel right now, but they can save your life.

Tips for taking medication

You must take your medication exactly as prescribed by your doctor. When your doctor gives you a new prescription, ask what the medication is for and how it acts in your body.

If you have a problem remembering to take your medicine, try these tips.

• Keep a chart of the different types of medication you take for your various conditions. Note when you are supposed to take them and at what dosage. Check off when you take the medication. Take the chart with you when you see the doctor.

• Take the medication with meals or during some other daily routine, like brushing your teeth. Get your doctor’s OK first.

• Try a pill box that separates the pills according to days and times. Your pharmacy usually carries these.

• Tape reminders where you are likely to see them.

Call your doctor if you develop unpleasant side effects, but don’t stop taking any medication on your own. Your doctor may adjust the dose or switch you to another medication. Don’t be discouraged if you have side effects, such as tiredness. It may take a while for your body to adjust and for the side effects to go away. Also, it may take several tries to find the medication that is right for you.

If the cost of the medication is a problem, tell your doctor. The drug may be available in generic form, which means it is the same as the brand name, but may cost much less. If it is still out of your price range, ask your doctor if the drug company offers an assistance program. You may be able to get the medication at a reduced rate, or even for free.

And remember to exercise according to your doctor’s advice, get to and maintain a healthy weight and eat right. You can help yourself lower blood pressure and cholesterol by maintaining good lifestyle habits.
Can Supplements Be Beneficial for Heart Disease?

Considering a supplement to help manage your cholesterol levels? Some supplements, when coupled with a healthy lifestyle, may play a role.

The evidence is clear. Good nutrition and regular exercise are major players in the prevention and treatment of heart disease. Taking a statin drug is standard therapy to lower cholesterol and triglycerides, and to raise HDL (good cholesterol). But researchers are confirming that some vitamins and/or plant substances may also play a role in managing heart disease.

What works
The American Heart Association (AHA) has endorsed fish oil and plant stanol supplements to help manage heart disease. Many doctors also advise getting more vitamin D. The supplements can be used along with diet and exercise.

But first talk to your doctor before you take any supplements. Even natural substances may interfere with the effectiveness of other medicines you are taking, such as blood thinners.

Fish oil, found in fatty fish, contains high amounts of the omega-3 fats DHA and EPA. These fats may help reduce the chances of blood clots, clogged arteries, irregular heartbeats, high triglycerides and death from heart disease.

- The AHA recommends at least 1 gram daily of DHA and EPA combined if you have heart disease.
- Though oily fish is preferable (salmon, mackerel, sardines), your doctor may also suggest EPA/DHA supplements.
- If you have high triglycerides, your doctor may suggest 2 to 4 grams of EPA/DHA per day.

Talk to your doctor about these options and the dose that might be right for you.

Plant stanols/sterols are substances that occur naturally in many plant foods. Two grams taken every day has been shown to lower LDL cholesterol by up to 15 percent.

- You can now get stanols or sterols in some margarine spreads, orange juice, yogurt, cereals and even granola bars.
- They can also be found in gel form as a supplement.
- To get the best benefit, you may need a daily dose of 2 grams through food or supplements.
- With the OK from your doctor, you can take them along with statins to boost cholesterol reduction.

Pairing a stanol supplement with an omega-3 supplement may have even greater benefits. Some studies have found that taking both together caused greater drops in triglycerides, total cholesterol and LDLs, while boosting HDLs.

Vitamin D may be an up-and-coming player in the field of heart disease treatment and prevention. People with low blood levels of vitamin D are known
Cholesterol

to be at higher risk for heart attack, congestive heart failure, hypertension, diabetes and earlier death.

• There are no specific guidelines yet for vitamin D in the treatment or prevention of heart disease. But getting adequate vitamin D through foods or supplements is widely advised for bone health. It has great potential for use in other chronic illness, too.

• The National Institutes of Health recommends 400 IU for healthy people ages 51 through 70. Healthy adults age 71 and older should try to get 600 IU daily.

• The National Osteoporosis Foundation suggests that adults age 50 and older should get 800 IU to 1,000 IU of vitamin D each day.

Ask your doctor what dose is right for you.

What about red yeast rice?

Red yeast rice is made from yeast grown and fermented on rice. It has been used for centuries in China. It contains monocolin A, a substance that helps block the body’s production of cholesterol. Monocolin A is the active ingredient in lovastatin (Mevacor), a widely used statin drug.

• In one small study, a combination of red yeast rice, fish oil and lifestyle changes helped lower cholesterol and triglycerides in some people who could not tolerate statin medicines.

• Some people get muscle pain as a side effect of statin drugs. Red yeast rice, which contains lower amounts of monocolin A, may be an option for these people.

NOTE: Currently, the FDA bans the sale of red yeast rice supplements that contain monocolin A (such as cholestin), claiming it is a drug. So without proper regulation, experts generally advise sticking to prescription statins for a safer, more standardized dose.

Researchers continue to explore the possible benefits and side effects of other supplements such as guggul resin, hawthorn and policosanol. So far, though, a clear link to heart health has yet to be proven.

Remember, no supplement can take the place of a good diet. Get plenty of fresh fruits and veggies, whole grains, lean proteins and healthy fats, and nix the processed foods.