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text PAULA GOODYER

kitchen cholesterol cures

Want to keep your arteries healthy?
There are two places to start – in
the gym and at home

EIGHTEEN MONTHS ago Julia Koutsovasilis was warned that, along with a high risk of heart disease, she was likely to develop diabetes unless she changed her lifestyle and lowered her cholesterol levels.

Julia, 33, heeded the warning. She improved her diet and got serious about exercise. Now she cooks with oats and lentils, snacks on nuts and has cut out takeaway meals. She also trains regularly at Fernwood, Preston, Vic.

The results have been impressive. Julia's total cholesterol level has fallen from 6.5 to 4.7 and her "bad" LDL cholesterol has dropped to a less »

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risky 3.2. On top of that, she's slimmed from a size 20 to a size 12.

"I knew if I didn't change I might not be around for my kids," she says.

Julia's results are far from unique.

Researchers at the University of Toronto, Canada, have found that by eating enough of certain foods such as nuts, soy, oats and barley, it's possible to reduce LDL cholesterol by 20 per cent after a year. That's comparable to the effect of taking a low-dose cholesterol-lowering drug.

Sue Radd, a dietitian with the Sydney-based Nutrition and Wellbeing Clinic, recommends this approach (known as The Portfolio Eating Plan) for lowering cholesterol without taking medication. Besides a diet low in saturated fat, she also suggests eating the following daily:

- 30g of unsalted nuts (a small handful)
- a tablespoon of plant sterol-enriched spread
- two serves of soy foods, such as a soy-milk smoothie, tofu, soy sausage, or edamame beans (green soybeans available frozen from some Asian stores)
- oats, oat bran or barley

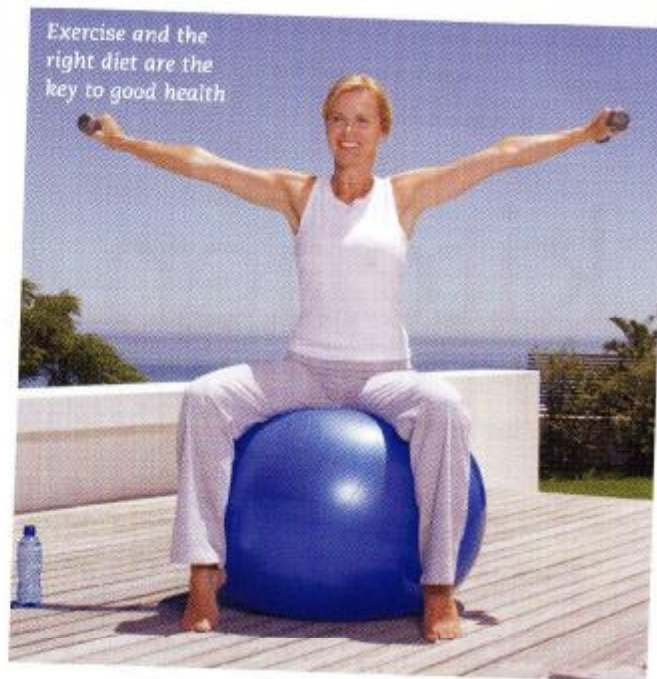
For a stronger effect, or if you find this way of eating difficult, include five teaspoons of psyllium husks daily (from supermarkets or health-food stores). These are high in soluble fibre, which helps reduce cholesterol absorption.

"Stir them into juice or sprinkle them over cereal. They don't have a taste, they're just like a thickener," says Sue.

These diet changes might not appeal to everyone (and anyone taking cholesterol-lowering medication should ask their doctor before trying them), but it shows how food can make a difference.

Even if cholesterol isn't a problem, a plant-based diet including these foods helps keep levels healthy without breaking the budget. Tofu is an inexpensive meat alternative, while a pack of traditional oats delivers a lot of healthy breakfasts. Barley is great in soups or as a substitute for rice in salad with chopped vegetables and nuts. Never tried a soy sausage? They're good baked in the oven or sautéed with a little chilli and added to soups or casseroles. Avocados are also high in cholesterol-lowering sterols and make a good alternative to butter as a spread.

But remember that even "good" fats like those in avocados, nuts and olives are high in kilojoules, so don't overdo it. **4***



"Eating enough of certain foods can reduce bad cholesterol"

CHOLESTEROL FACT FILE

Does cholesterol in food cause high levels in your body?

"It doesn't raise blood cholesterol to the same extent as saturated fat," says Kylie Andrew, consultant dietitian to Fernwood's Scientific Advisory Board. Most cholesterol is made by your body from saturated fat in your diet – found in fatty meats and poultry, full-fat dairy products and commercial cakes, pies and biscuits.

"Replacing saturated fats with polyunsaturated and

monounsaturated fats is the most effective way to lower blood cholesterol levels. So instead of butter and lard, use heart-friendly oils like olive, canola, sunflower, sesame, soy or peanut," says Kylie.

What's a healthy level?

The best person to ask is your doctor. He or she can do a blood test and, depending on the results and whether or not you have risk factors for heart disease, tell you if your LDL cholesterol needs to be lower. In Australia, the average total

cholesterol level is around 5.5, with an LDL of 3.5, says Dr David Sullivan, a National Heart Foundation spokesperson. But this isn't ideal, he adds. What would be healthier is a total cholesterol level of 4, with an LDL of 2.5.

What's the difference between good and bad?

Bad LDL cholesterol gets into the bloodstream and clogs arteries. Good HDL cholesterol helps remove the bad kind. The lower your total and LDL cholesterol, and

the higher your HDL, the lower your risk of heart disease.

What's so bad about trans fats?

These increase bad cholesterol and lower good. Although they're found in small amounts in animal foods like dairy and meat products, the real worry is that trans fats are often used in manufactured goods such as pies, cakes and biscuits. Some margarines also contain them, so choose spreads stamped with the Heart Foundation Tick of approval.