

Health & Science

HEART SPECIAL

apr 27, 2006 health&science 5+

Diet v drugs on the cholesterol front

Is food as good as drugs for lowering cholesterol?

That might depend on how much you like soy smoothies and barley risotto, but a small Canadian study reported in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* in March found that sticking to a plant-based diet which included soy, nuts, plant sterol-enriched margarines and foods like oats and barley every day could reduce cholesterol by 20 per cent after a year - comparable to taking a low-dose statin, a drug that lowers cholesterol.

All these foods are known to lower cholesterol individually. The study's researcher, Professor David Jenkins of the University of Toronto, wanted to see if eating all of them every day would have a more significant effect.

Jenkins's approach, called the Portfolio Eating Plan, is used in Sydney by Sue Radd, an accredited practising dietitian. She recommends it to clients who want to reduce high cholesterol levels without medication.

Along with a healthy diet low in saturated fat, she recommends that each day they eat 30 grams of nuts, about one tablespoon of plant sterol-enriched margarine, and two serves of soy foods such as soy milk smoothies, tofu, soy sausage or edamame beans.

The latter are green soybeans available frozen from some Asian stores - good in stir fries or as a



Soy easy ... bean curd can beat high cholesterol without drugs. Photo: Eddie Jim

snack. The diet should include oats, oat bran or barley daily - or, if it's easier, five teaspoons of psyllium husk, which is available from supermarkets. These foods are all rich in viscous fibre, which helps lower cholesterol by soaking up bile acids in your gut.

"Your liver uses bile acids to make cholesterol, and if there's less bile acids, there's less cholesterol made," Radd explains. "Psyllium husks don't have a taste - they're just like a thickener.

"They're good to add when you're stewing fruit. Adding them to a soy smoothie and refrigerating it overnight turns the smoothie into a light mousse. You can also add two teaspoons of psyllium husks to muesli or cereal, or just dissolve a teaspoon in a glass of water."

What if cholesterol levels are normal and you want to keep them healthy? There's no need to eat as much of these foods each day, but it's good to eat them as often as possible, she says.

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