Mended Hearts Europe

GoTo*Guide*

HIGH CHOLESTEROL

To provide you and your loved ones with a
comprehensive understanding of high cholesterol

GoToGuide: **HIGH CHOLESTEROL**

INTRODUCTION

Understanding cholesterol and its role in cardiovascular health and disease can be confusing.

If you have high levels of cholesterol, particularly LDL, commonly known as "bad cholesterol", you need to understand what it is, why is it important to know your cholesterol numbers, and what are the risks of high levels of it. Unmanaged high cholesterol can lead to cardiovascular events like a heart attack or stroke. However, there are different actions you can take to reduce your risk. With the right support, you can improve your health and live a heart-healthy life.

The purpose of this *GoTo Guide* is to support you and your loved ones in understanding cholesterol, the importance of knowing your numbers, and to provide you with strategies and tools to improve your health.

By understanding your condition and following the *Seven Steps to Becoming an Empowered Patient*, you can collaborate effectively with your healthcare team and support network. Working together can help you manage your condition well and create a plan adapted to your health needs.

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The **Seven Steps** to Becoming an Empowered Patient:

STEP 1   **TAKE CONTROL**

By using this Guide, you are taking control of your healthcare and embarking on the first step to becoming an empowered patient. Within this resource, you will find valuable information along with tools and resources to help you manage your cholesterol and reduce its associated risks.

STEP 2   **EDUCATE YOURSELF**

Knowledge is power. For you to be truly empowered, it is important to understand what a high cholesterol diagnosis means. Talk to your healthcare provider about this condition and ask where you can find trustworthy information to learn more.

STEP 3   **KNOW YOUR RIGHTS**

Many patients feel they are dependent on the system and simply need to do "what the doctor says". While it is crucial to follow your treatment plan, you also need to be aware of, and assert, your rights as a patient when necessary.

STEP 4   **BE PART OF THE TEAM**

You know yourself better than anyone. Make sure to discuss any questions, issues or concerns with your healthcare team. Communicate your needs clearly, and attend all your appointments.

STEP 5   **GET INFORMATION**

If you need medication, surgery or a device, you can never ask too many questions. Your doctor is there to ensure you feel confident about your treatment plan, so do not be afraid of asking questions until you fully understand everything.

STEP 6   **VOICE YOUR OPINIONS**

Your voice matters. Your needs, thoughts and opinions are valued. Speak up if you feel confused or uncomfortable about any decision.

STEP 7   **MAKE INFORMED DECISIONS**

You might come across the term "shared decision–making". It refers to ongoing communication between you and your healthcare provider, making you an active participant in decisions about your treatment options. Your preferences matter, so be sure to take an active role in conversations about your condition.

STEP 1

TAKE CONTROL

If you have been diagnosed with high cholesterol, you probably have many questions. Understanding cholesterol can be confusing, as it is influenced by many factors, and can be associated with increased risk of cardiovascular diseases.

Taking control starts with understanding your condition and what you can do about it. This *Guide* is here to help. It is your companion in building confidence, finding support, and making informed choices, in other words, to becoming an empowered patient. You are more than your diagnosis – and how you move forward is still in your hands.

Over
50% *of adults*
IN EUROPE HAVE HIGH CHOLESTEROL,
the highest rate in the world

EVEN MORE CONCERNING, MOST PEOPLE DO NOT HAVE IT UNDER CONTROL, INCREASING THEIR *risk of heart attack and stroke*

! **KNOWING YOUR CHOLESTEROL NUMBERS, RECOGNISING YOUR RISKS, AND WORKING WITH YOUR DOCTOR ON A TREATMENT PLAN THAT IS RIGHT FOR YOU, ARE KEY TO PROTECTING YOUR HEART HEALTH.**

STEP 2

EDUCATE YOURSELF

Once you decide to prioritise your health and well-being, the next important step is to educate yourself. Learning about cholesterol, its normal levels, diagnostic tests, and treatment options empowers you to make informed decisions about your care.

Education is crucial in becoming an empowered patient. At Mended Hearts Europe, our community of patients affected by cardiovascular disease – along with their caregivers and loved ones – have seen first-hand that "knowledge is power". By learning more about their conditions, they gain the tools to take an active role in their care and improve their well-being.

Navigating all the available resources can be overwhelming, making it hard to know what is accurate. This guide offers essential insights into high cholesterol and what you can do to stay as healthy as possible. By reading this, you are also one step closer to becoming an empowered patient.

WHAT IS CHOLESTEROL?

Cholesterol is a soft, waxy substance, similar to fat, that is found in your body's cells and bloodstream. It is part of a group of substances called lipids, which also includes fats.

There is a common misconception that cholesterol is "bad". In fact, cholesterol is essential for many important body functions - from building cell membranes, producing certain vitamins and hormones (such as oestrogen and testosterone), to supporting the digestion of fatty foods. Cholesterol is naturally produced by your liver, but you also get some from animal-based foods, such as meat, dairy, and eggs.

While cholesterol itself is not harmful, having high levels of low-density lipoprotein cholesterol (LDL-C) – a type of cholesterol discussed later in this guide – can increase your risk of cardiovascular disease (CVD), including ischemic heart disease (which can lead to a heart attack), and cerebrovascular disease (which could cause a stroke). These are among the leading causes of death in Europe and worldwide[1].

More than 50% of adults in Europe have high levels of cholesterol[2] – the highest rate in the world – increasing their risk for developing CVD compared to those with healthy cholesterol levels. High cholesterol is a significant health concern, affecting patients, families, and healthcare systems alike.

The good news is that with the right treatment and lifestyle changes, high cholesterol can be managed effectively, helping to lower your risk of CVD. This *Guide* will help you learn how.

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1 Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME), Global Burden of Disease 2021: Findings from the GBD 2021 Study (Seattle, WA: IHME, 16 May 2024).
2 M.-S. Mohamed-Yassin, N. Baharudin, S. Abdul-Razak, A. S. Ramli and N. M. Lai, 'Global prevalence of dyslipidaemia in adult populations: a systematic review protocol', BMJ Open, 11.12 (2021), e049662, https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2021-049662

TYPES OF CHOLESTEROL

Because cholesterol does not dissolve in water, it cannot travel through the bloodstream by itself. To do so it travels in small packages of proteins called **lipoproteins** (lipid + protein = lipoprotein). There are two main types of lipoproteins that transport cholesterol:

Low-density lipoprotein cholesterol (LDL- C)

LDL-C is sometimes called "bad" cholesterol because having high levels can increase your risk of heart disease and stroke. When there is too much LDL-C in your blood, it can build up in the walls of your arteries, a process known as **atherosclerosis**.

Over time, this buildup forms **plaque**, a substance that is made up of cholesterol, fats, calcium, fibrin (a blood-clotting substance) and cellular waste. Plaque can narrow your arteries and reduce blood flow. It can also rupture, leading to the formation of a blood clot. If the clot blocks the blood flow in an artery completely, it can cause serious problems. For example, if the blockage happens in a coronary artery (which supplies oxygen and nutrients to the heart muscle), it can result in a heart attack.

High-density lipoprotein cholesterol (HDL-C)

HDL-C can help remove excess LDL-C in the bloodstream. HDL-C transports this excess back to the liver, where it is broken down and eliminated from the body. This process helps to lower your LDL-C levels, although HDL-C carries only a small portion of blood's cholesterol.

Having higher levels of HDL-C can improve your cardiovascular health – and this is why it is known as "good" cholesterol.

TRIGLYCERIDES

Triglycerides are not a type of cholesterol, but they are the most common type of fat in your body. They can be found in certain foods you eat, but the body can produce them from extra carbohydrates you consume, such as sugar, alcohol, white bread, among others.

Like cholesterol, triglycerides cannot travel through the bloodstream on their own. They are carried in the blood as lipoproteins. Triglycerides provide energy to the body, and any excess is stored in fat cells to be used later, especially between meals.

High triglyceride levels are often linked with being overweight or obese. Other factors that can raise triglycerides include smoking, being physically inactive, drinking too much alcohol, and eating too many carbohydrates. Certain health conditions, like diabetes, and a family history of high triglycerides can also play a role.

Although triglycerides do not directly stick to artery walls like cholesterol can, high levels can lead to inflammation of the arteries. Over time, this may contribute to the buildup of plaque in the arteries, raising the risk of heart attack or stroke.

WHAT ARE THE DANGERS OF HIGH CHOLESTEROL?

While cholesterol is essential for your body to function, having too much of it – known as high cholesterol, hypercholesterolemia or hyperlipidemia – can be harmful. Excess cholesterol, along with fats and other substances can build up in the inner walls of the arteries. This buildup is called plaque, and it can narrow or block the arteries, reducing blood flow to the heart, brain or other parts of the body.

This process is called **atherosclerosis**. If a plaque ruptures (bursts), it can cause a blood clot to form. This clot can completely block blood flow and trigger a heart attack or a stroke, depending on which artery is affected.

Atherosclerosis is the root cause of many cardiovascular diseases, which are among the leading causes of death in Europe and around the world. One common condition is coronary artery disease (CAD), also known as coronary heart disease or ischemic heart disease. CAD occurs when the arteries that supply the heart become narrowed or blocked by plaque buildup, which can result in a heart attack, also called myocardial infarction.

Other arteries can also be affected. When plaque builds up in the carotid arteries, which supply the brain, it can cause a stroke. When it affects arteries in the legs, it can lead to peripheral arterial disease, which often causes pain.

① PLAQUE BUILDUP

② INFLAMED ARTERY WALL

③ REDUCED BLOOD FLOW
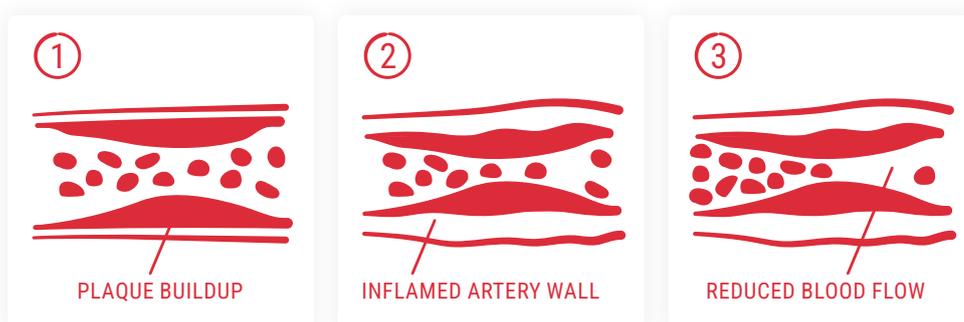
STEP 1

STEP 2

STEP 3

STEP 4

STEP 5

STEP 6

STEP 7

CAUSES OF HIGH CHOLESTEROL

About one in two Europeans have high cholesterol, which is usually defined as a total cholesterol level above 5 mmol/L (200 mg/dL).

High cholesterol can be inherited – as in the case of a condition called familial hypercholesterolemia (FH) – or it can be caused by unhealthy lifestyle choices, or a combination of both. While 1 in 250 to 300 people in Europe have FH[3], most people develop high cholesterol due to lifestyle factors. Maintaining a heart-healthy lifestyle is important and can help prevent cardiovascular events and slow the progression of heart disease.

The most common causes of non-inherited high cholesterol in European countries include:

An unhealthy diet	Being overweight or obese
Lack of physical activity	Excessive alcohol consumption
Smoking or exposure to tobacco smoke	

3   European Atherosclerosis Society Consensus Panel, '2023 Update on European Atherosclerosis Society Consensus Statement on Homozygous Familial Hypercholesterolaemia: New Treatments and Clinical Guidance', European Heart Journal, 44.25 (2023), 2277–91 https://doi.org/10.1093/eurheartj/ehad176.

WHAT IS FAMILIAL HYPERCHOLESTEROLEMIA?

Familial Hypercholesterolemia (FH) is a genetic condition that causes very high levels of LDL-C from birth. It is inherited, meaning it runs in families. If a parent has FH, there is a 50% chance that each child will also have the condition. This is because FH is caused by a dominant gene, which means if someone inherits it from one parent, even if the gene from the other parent is normal, the child will still be born with FH[4].

It is estimated that 1 in 250 to 1 in 300 people in Europe have FH. That means more than 500,000 children and over 2 million adults are affected. However, only about 20% of people with FH have been diagnosed[5].

This is important because without early diagnosis and treatment, people with FH are at higher risk of heart attack and other cardiovascular events at a young age.

♡ People who inherited one faulty gene can have a heart attack or other cardiac events as early as their 40s or 50s.

♡ Those who inherit two faulty genes (one from each parent) may experience heart problems in their teens or early 20s.

FH is somewhat different from typical high LDL-C. It often shows clear warning signs, such as:

♡ Very high LDL-C levels (between 5 mmol/L and 10 mmol/L, or above 4 mmol/L in children)

♡ A family history of early heart attacks or high cholesterol

♡ Parents with resistant high LDL-C levels, even with treatment

♡ Physical signs, like:

  ♡ Xanthomas (fatty lumps under the skin)

  ♡ Xanthelasmas (yellow patches around the eyelids)

  ♡ Corneal arcus (grey, white, or yellowish rings around the cornea of the eye)

Because over 80% of people with FH do not know they have it, it is often only discovered after a serious cardiovascular event.

The good news is that FH can be diagnosed with a simple blood test. Sharing your family history of heart disease, heart attack and/or high cholesterol with your doctor is also important. If FH is suspected, genetic testing can help confirm the diagnosis.

With early and regular treatment, people with FH can live longer, healthier lives.

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4   2023 Update on European Atherosclerosis Society Consensus Statement on Homozygous Familial Hypercholesterolaemia: new treatments andclinical guidance. (Eur Heart J. 2023; 44(25): 2277–2291)
5   G De Backer et al., "Prevalence and management of familial hypercholesterolaemia in coronary patients: an analysis of EUROASPIRE IV, a study of the European Society of Cardiology", Atherosclerosis 241.1 (2015): 169–175, doi:10.1016/j.atherosclerosis.2015.04.809.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF HIGH CHOLESTEROL

High cholesterol itself does not usually cause any symptoms. Most people will not feel anything, even if their cholesterol levels are high. However, in rare cases – especially in people with severely high cholesterol, such as those with familial hypercholesterolemia (FH) – there may be visible signs (see the FH section above for more details).

Because high cholesterol is silent, the only way to know your levels is by getting a blood test. Even without signs or symptoms, plaque can build up in your arteries over time, leading to atherosclerosis. This narrowing and hardening of the arteries can eventually cause coronary artery disease (CAD), which does have symptoms, such as chest pain (angina) during activity or even at rest.

In many cases, the first sign of high cholesterol is a serious event, like a heart attack or stroke. That is why it is important to know the warning signs and seek emergency help immediately if you or someone else experiences them.

Symptoms of a heart attack

Heart attacks may be sudden and intense, but more often start slowly with mild discomfort. Do not wait – **if you or someone else has these symptoms, call your local emergency services right away.**

Chest discomfort
Most heart attacks involve pain or pressure in the centre of the chest that lasts more than a few minutes, or goes away and comes back. It may feel like squeezing, fullness or discomfort.

Shortness of breath
This can occur with or without chest pain.

Pain in other areas
Discomfort may spread to the arms, back, neck, jaw or stomach.

Other symptoms
You may also feel lightheaded, break out in a cold sweat, or feel nauseated.

> **!**
>
> *Heart attack symptoms for women*
> **WHILE CHEST PAIN IS STILL THE MOST COMMON SYMPTOM, WOMEN ARE MORE LIKELY THAN MEN TO EXPERIENCE SHORTNESS OF BREATH, NAUSEA OR VOMITING, AND PAIN IN THE BACK OR JAW.**

Symptoms of a stroke

Stroke is a medical emergency. If you or someone else has any of these symptoms call emergency services immediately.

Sudden **numbness or weakness** in the face, arm, or leg, especially on one side of the body

Sudden **confusion,** difficulty speaking or understanding

Sudden **dizziness,** trouble walking, or loss of balance or coordination

Sudden **vision changes** in one or both eyes

DIAGNOSING HIGH CHOLESTEROL

Know your numbers. High cholesterol does not have symptoms, but it can lead to serious conditions like heart disease, stroke or other cardiovascular problems. That is why it is important to have your cholesterol levels checked regularly with a blood test called a fasting lipid panel (also called lipoprotein profile).

The "fasting" part means you should not eat or drink anything (except water) for about 8 hours. This simple blood test takes just a few minutes and measures:

♡ Total cholesterol

♡ HDL cholesterol

♡ LDL cholesterol

♡ Triglycerides

Together, these results give a full picture of the fats (lipids) in your bloodstream.

What Are Considered Normal Cholesterol and Triglyceride Levels?

In healthy adults without known cardiovascular disease, cholesterol is typically checked every few years. If you have risk factors such as high blood pressure, smoking, diabetes, or a family history of heart disease, your doctor will monitor your levels more often.

While cholesterol targets may vary across Europe, the most commonly used reference values for healthy adults are:

Total Cholesterol	below 5 mmol/L (200 mg/dL)		
LDL Cholesterol	below 3.0 mmol/L (116 mg/dL) for otherwise **healthy people**	below 2.6 mmol/L (100 mg/dL) for people at **moderate risk** for CVD	below 1.8 mmol/L (70 mg/dL) OR even lower for people who have **high to very high risk** of CVD
HDL Cholesterol	For men: above 1.0 mmol/L (39 mg/dL)		For women: above 1.2 mmol/L (47 mg/dL)
Triglycerides	below 1.7 mmol/L (150 mg/dL) is considered to indicate lower risk		

NOTE: In Europe, cholesterol levels are typically measured as millimoles per litre (mmol/L), although you may also see these values expressed in milligrams per decilitre (mg/dL).

If your numbers differ from these target ranges, your healthcare provider will discuss what this means and help you plan next steps.

Why LDL–C matters most

LDL-C is the main contributor to plaque buildup in the arteries, leading to atherosclerosis. That is the reason why lowering this LDL-C is often the primary focus of treatment. If you are at high risk for cardiovascular disease, your doctor may set a lower LDL-C goal, to be less then 1.8 mmol/L.

Your healthcare provider will review your test results with you, either during a visit or by the phone, and help you understand what they mean. Together, you will discuss whether lifestyle changes, medications, or additional tests are needed.

Other tests that may be recommended

If your cholesterol is high, or you have other risk factors, your doctor may order additional tests, such as a coronary artery calcium score (CAC). This scan does not measure cholesterol but shows whether calcium and plaque have built up in your arteries. It can help assess your overall risk of heart disease.

Cholesterol and heart health tracker ⊕

DOWNLOAD THE FORM HERE

Understanding your risk

It is important to know that your cholesterol numbers are just part of a bigger picture when it comes to your heart health. These numbers indicate your risk, or likelihood, of experiencing a future event like a heart attack or stroke. However, your overall risk also depends on other factors such as your age, family history, lifestyle, and any existing health conditions like diabetes or high blood pressure. While the reference values explained above are meant for healthy people at low risk of cardiovascular disease, your individual risk may be higher if you have additional risk factors. Your healthcare provider can calculate your overall risk. Ask them to explain your results, so you fully understand what your numbers mean and how to manage your risk.

What is Lp(a)?

Lp(a) stands for lipoprotein (a) and is pronounced "lipoprotein little a" or "L-P little a". It is a type of lipoprotein, a particle in the blood that carries cholesterol, fats, and proteins. Lp(a) is produced in the liver and is inherited from one or both parent.

Structurally, Lp(a) is similar to low-density lipoprotein (LDL). It is made up of two other smaller lipoproteins bound together, including an apolipoprotein(a). While it is normal for Lp(a) to be present in the blood, high levels are associated with inflammation of arteries and the development of arterial plaque, increasing the risk of heart attack, stroke, and other cardiovascular diseases.

Lp(a) is not included in standard cholesterol tests, but your healthcare provider can order a specific blood test to measure it. Lp(a) levels are mostly genetically determined, so they typically only need to be measured once in a lifetime.

Your healthcare provider may recommend testing Lp(a) levels if:

♡ you have a family history of high Lp(a)

♡ you or a close family member have had early (premature) heart disease

♡ you have been diagnosed with familial hypercholesterolemia (FH).

It is estimated that more than 30% of people with FH also have high levels of Lp(a).

As of early 2025, there are clinical trials underway testing new medications that could treat high Lp(a). While no treatments are approved yet, progress is being made.

TREATING HIGH CHOLESTEROL

There are different ways to treat high cholesterol, depending on your lipid profile lab results and other individual risk factors your doctor or healthcare provider will take into account.

Lifestyle changes

Your doctor will ask you to make some lifestyle changes (further discussed later in this *Guide*) to support your heart health, help lower your cholesterol, and prevent complications. Adopting habits that are beneficial for everyone — such as eating a heart-healthy diet, exercising regularly, and limiting or avoiding alcohol consumption — can also benefit individuals with elevated cholesterol levels. Consult your doctor regarding the lifestyle changes that will help you.

Medications

While many people can control their cholesterol through healthy eating and regular physical activity, others may also need medications to bring their LDL-C and triglyceride levels into a healthy range.

Medications to treat high cholesterol.

When medication is needed, your doctor will work with you to choose the treatment plan that is right for you.

There are several types of medications that can help lower LDL-C and sometimes triglycerides. These medicines can be used on their own or in combination, depending on your individual needs. Here are the most commonly used ones:

Statins: Reduce the amount of cholesterol your liver produces, which lowers LDL-C and can also lower triglycerides. According to the European Society of Cardiology, statins reduce the risk of heart attack, stroke, and the need for coronary interventions. They are often the first-line treatment for people at increased cardiovascular risk.

Ezetimibe: This medication works by blocking cholesterol absorption in the intestine. It is sometimes used alongside another ongoing therapy when further LDL-C reduction is needed.

Bempedoic acid: Like statins, this drug helps reduce cholesterol production in the liver. It may be used if statins are not suitable, and ezetimibe alone is not enough.

PCSK9 Inhibitors: (Proprotein convertase subtilisin/kexin type 9) These medications help the liver remove more LDL-C from the blood by preventing LDL receptors, which normally clear cholesterol, from being destroyed.

Bile acid sequestrants: These drugs work by blocking the bile acids from being absorbed in the digestive system into the blood. This forces your liver to use more cholesterol from your blood to make new bile acids, which helps reduce LDL-C levels over time.

Medications to treat high triglycerides

Fibrates: These drugs make it harder for the body to transport triglycerides through the blood stream. Fibrates also increase the liver's ability to produce more HDL-C.

Icosapent Ethyl: This medication can help lowering triglycerides by reducing the amount that is produced by the liver.

The treatment plan for high cholesterol is tailored for each person, and depends on different factors, including lab results, overall risk of heart disease or stroke, allergies, and how suitable certain medications are. Not all medications work the same for everyone. As an empowered patient, you can take an active role by understanding which medications you need to take, what they do, when and how to take them (for example, with or without food, morning or evening), how often to take them, and what the possible side effects are.

> **!**
>
> **DO NOT STOP TAKING YOUR MEDICATION UNLESS YOUR HEALTHCARE PROVIDER TELLS YOU TO.**
>
> **PEOPLE WITH HIGH LDL-C AND TRIGLYCERIDE LEVELS WHO STOP TAKING THEIR STATIN DOUBLE THEIR CHANCES OF HAVING A HEART EVENT.**

Stick to your medication plan. Medicines only work properly when you take them as prescribed, so it is important to follow your doctor's instructions exactly – without making changes or adding anything unless your doctor agrees. If your current plan is not working, do not hesitate to speak up. You might need a different medication or a modification to your dosage. Let your healthcare provider know right away if you are experiencing side effects or start feeling worse, you can work together to find a better option.

Top 10 medications tips ⊕

DOWNLOAD THE TIPS HERE

Medications tips

We understand that remembering to take medications and staying on track can be challenging. That is why we have included a handout on this page with the top 10 tips for taking medication – shared by people with heart disease who know what works.

In addition to our Top 10 Medication Tips, here are a few other important reminders to help you follow your medication plan:

⊘ **Fill your prescriptions on time** – Be sure to get your prescriptions refilled before you run out. If automatic refills are an option in your country, consider requesting them. In addition, investigate the possibility of having your prescriptions delivered to your home by mail, if available.

⊘ **Follow instructions** – There are instructions on medications labels and accompanying information regarding when and how often to take them, as well as any precautions to observe. If you do not understand the instructions, promptly call your doctor or pharmacist for clarification.

⊘ **Adhere to your medications** – Whether they are oral or injected, do not stop taking your medications without consulting your doctor first. If you experience side effects, discuss with your doctor the appropriate course of action.

⊘ **Create your own routine** – Creating your own daily routine can make it easier to stick to your treatment. Try taking your medications at the same time each day and linking them to something you already do – like brushing your teeth or having breakfast. A steady routine can help you stay on track without even thinking about it.

⊘ **Prepare when travelling** – When travelling, pack all your medications and include a few extra doses in case of unexpected delays. When flying, keep your medications with you, and never place them in a checked bag. If you will be away for an extended period of time, ask your doctor or pharmacist about getting a multi-month refill. Moreover, be aware that medications availability may differ from country to country.

⊘ **European Union cross-border prescriptions** – According to European Union (EU) regulations, a prescription from a doctor in one EU country is valid in all other EU countries and the European Economic Area (EEA) – as long as it contains specific information. If you are planning an extended trip, discuss this with your doctor. However, be aware that certain medications may not be authorised for sale or available in another country, even within the EU.[6]

⊘ **Fake medications** – Fake medicines can be contaminated or mislabelled. Do not take the chance; instead of improving your health, they can harm you. Whenever feasible, stick to your usual pharmacy, and never buy medicines from unknown websites or marketplaces.

⊘ **Non-prescription medications** – Talk to your healthcare provider before initiating any over-the-counter medications (such as vitamins, cough or cold remedies, for instance). Some of these products may contain ingredients that could interact with your prescribed heart medications. Remember, just because a medicine does not require a prescription does not mean it is harmless.

> *Important:*
> **GRAPEFRUIT AND GRAPEFRUIT JUICE MAY INCREASE YOUR BLOOD LEVEL OF STATIN MEDICATIONS AND INCREASE THE POSSIBILITY OF SIDE EFFECTS**

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6   European Commission, 'Presenting a Prescription in Another EU Country', Your Europe, https://europa.eu/youreurope/citizens/health/prescription-medicine-abroad/prescriptions/index_en.htm

STEP 3

KNOW YOUR RIGHTS

Even empowered patients may feel hesitant to ask questions or express concerns, but it is essential to do so. Your health is on the line, and you are the best person to manage it in a way that suits you. As a patient, you have rights that should be respected.

You have the right to:

♡ Be treated as part of the team

♡ Ask questions and receive answers

♡ Have your concerns heard

♡ Have easy access to notes and medical records
  (this may vary by country – check local regulations)

♡ Get another opinion

♡ Suggest alternatives

♡ Feel confident in your healthcare team

♡ Change your mind

♡ Appeal decisions if you do not agree

♡ Know your rights and insist that they are respected

STEP 4

BE PART OF THE TEAM

Being part of your care team might feel unfamiliar — especially if you are used to seeing healthcare professionals as the ones with all the answers. While doctors and nurses bring medical expertise, you bring something just as important: *knowledge of yourself*. You understand your lifestyle, needs, preferences, and what truly matters to you, better than anyone else.

While it might be simpler to follow the guidance of the healthcare provider, patients tend to do better and are more likely to stick to their treatment plan when they are actively involved in their care. Today, doctors encourage patient engagement.

When you ask questions, express your opinions, and share what works (or does not) in your daily life, your care becomes more personal and more effective. Do not hesitate to speak up or suggest changes if something does not feel right. You are not just a patient — you are a key member of the team.

STEP 5 ⓘ

GET INFORMATION

You have already completed Step 2 by educating yourself, yet there might be additional information required from your healthcare professionals to effectively manage your condition. Hence, Step 5 in becoming an empowered patient is to make sure you understand everything you can about your condition — not just its general aspects, but also how it specifically impacts you and what actions you can take in response.

Consider these suggestions for questions you may want to ask your doctor — ensure you enquire about any concerns you may have as well. Writing them down in advance will help you remember them. Bring them along to your appointments and if you think of new questions afterward, be sure to jot them down and take them with you to your next visit.

♡ **What are my cholesterol numbers and what do they mean?**

♡ **What is my risk of cardiovascular disease?**

♡ **How often do I need to have my cholesterol levels checked?**

♡ **What changes should I make to my diet to help lower my cholesterol? Where can I find more information about heart-healthy eating?**

♡ **What is a healthy weight for me?**

♡ **What exercises and physical activities are best for me that will help me improve my cholesterol levels?**

♡ **Am I at increased risk for heart disease or stroke? If so, are there other medicines I should be taking?**

♡ **What are the risks and benefits of each treatment option?**

♡ **What do I do if I am taking medicines and my cholesterol is still too high?**

♡ **What should I do to monitor my cholesterol numbers?**

♡ **Do I have FH?**

Top 5 tips to finding trustworthy resources ⊕

DOWNLOAD THE TIPS HERE

STEP 6

VOICE YOUR OPINIONS

You have recognised the importance of being an integral part of the team in Step 4. Step 6 in becoming an empowered patient is to learn how to be comfortable expressing your opinion within that team.

Speaking up for yourself can be challenging, especially when you disagree with your doctor. However, as a valued member of the team, you are encouraged to voice your opinion respectfully. You should not feel like you are bothering them or being a difficult patient. Remember – your input is essential because you are the one living with heart failure. Your needs, preferences and concerns matter.

TOP 10 TIPS FROM PATIENTS ABOUT COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR HEALTHCARE PROVIDER

1 Be clear about your health goals and specific about what you want to know.

2 Do not hesitate to keep asking questions until you understand.

3 Learn about your condition so you are better prepared.

4 Choose the right healthcare professional for you and consider getting a second opinion if needed.

5 Ask about the best way to communicate with your healthcare professional.

6 Keep a list of questions and bring it along to your appointments.

7 Request resources and educational materials from your healthcare provider so you can learn more.

8 Remember, you are the expert on your own health – share your thoughts and opinions.

9 Bring someone with you to appointments for an extra set of ears.

10 Do not wait for your next appointment to raise questions or concerns – reach out when something is on your mind.

STEP 7

MAKE INFORMED DECISIONS

The final step in becoming an empowered patient is putting everything together and making informed decisions that are right for you. By educating yourself, embracing teamwork, and becoming comfortable with the idea that your opinions matter, you gain a sense of control. When you are empowered, you can make informed choices about your healthcare. When you and your doctors agree on the treatment plan, you are more likely to adhere to it.

This following section explains the actionable steps and lifestyle changes you can make to live a healthy life and keep your cholesterol under control.

LIVING WITH HIGH CHOLESTEROL

If you have high cholesterol, you are not alone – about one in two people in Europe are affected. Whether you have just been diagnosed, have cardiovascular disease, or have already had a heart attack or stroke, there are steps you can take to protect your health.

Managing your cholesterol is important to prevent another heart event or stop your condition from getting worse. The good news is that there are many things you can do to lower your risk.

Before diving into lifestyle changes, it helps to set clear health goals. Knowing what you want to achieve – whether is it lowering your cholesterol, improving your energy levels, or avoiding another heart event – can give you direction. Start by discussing your goals with your doctor. Even small steps can lead to big improvements when you have a plan and the right support.

Please record your health goals here:

1. Follow your treatment plan

You have hopefully developed a good treatment strategy together with your healthcare team. This approach may include dietary adjustments, physical activity routines, and medications. It is very important to follow your treatment plan and discuss any needed changes with your doctor.

Keep in mind that your plan should be tailored to your needs. If you notice any side effects with your medications, if you have questions or concerns, or if something does not feel right or is making you feel worse, call your doctor or healthcare professional right away so you can make any needed adjustments.

> **!** **ALWAYS CONSULT WITH YOUR DOCTOR BEFORE MAKING ANY CHANGES TO YOUR MEDICATION OR PHYSICAL ACTIVITY ROUTINE.**

My treatment plan is:

2. Make any needed dietary changes

Eating healthy is always beneficial. A balanced, nutritious diet can help lower your cholesterol levels, boost your energy, and help reduce fatigue. For those struggling with excess weight, healthy eating can also support gradual and sustainable weight loss.

People with high cholesterol need to make some changes to their diet. Always follow the advice of your doctor or healthcare provider when it comes to what food to eat and which to limit or avoid. Some foods might interfere with your medications, so it is important to know exactly what they are and whether you need to avoid them completely or just reduce how much you consume. Make sure your doctor or healthcare provider reviews and approves your dietary plan.

It can be discouraging to limit favourite foods and beverages that do not fit into your healthy eating plan. But remember – you do not have to change everything overnight. In most cases, there are plenty of helpful resources and healthy alternatives that can still be enjoyable and satisfying.

Reduce saturated fat

One of the most effective changes you can make to your diet is to reduce how much saturated fat you eat. On food labels, you can check how much saturated fat a product contains. For most people, it is recommended to keep saturated fat to less than 6% of total daily calories.

Saturated fats are mainly found in animal-based products such as beef, pork, lamb, poultry (especially with the skin), and full-fat dairy. They are also found in eggs and certain plant oils like coconut and palm oil. Because these fats are usually solid at room temperature, they are sometimes called "solid fats."

You do not need to cut out saturated fat completely, but limiting it can help lower your cholesterol. Many tasty substitutes – such as lean meats, low-fat dairy, or plant-based oils – can make this change easier.

Common sources of saturated fat include:

♡ Beef, lamb, or pork

♡ Poultry with skin

♡ Beef fat (tallow) and lard

♡ Butter, cream, and cheese

♡ Ice cream

♡ Coconut, palm and palm kernel oil

♡ Many baked goods and fried foods

Easy swaps to lower saturated fat:

♡ **Instead of fatty cuts of beef, lamb, or pork**
– choose lean cuts, skinless poultry, or plant-based proteins like beans and lentils

♡ **Instead of butter or lard**
– choose olive oil, canola oil, or sunflower oil for cooking

♡ **Instead of full-fat milk, yogurt, or cheese**
– choose low-fat or fat-free versions

♡ **Instead of ice cream**
– choose frozen yogurt or fruit-based sorbets

♡ **Instead of fried foods**
– choose grilled, baked, or steamed options

Increase soluble fibre

Soluble fibre is the part of plants that cannot be broken down by our digestive system. It is found in foods like kidney beans, brussels sprouts, apples, pears, and oatmeal. Increasing soluble fibre in your diet can help reduce LDL-C and support overall heart health. Try adding these foods to your meals regularly for an easy and natural way to improve your cholesterol levels.

Top 10
healthy
eating tips

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**DOWNLOAD THE
TIPS HERE**

Prepare foods in a heart-healthy way

How you cook your food can make a big difference to your cholesterol levels. Whenever possible, choose methods like broiling, baking or grilling instead of frying or cooking with butter or large amounts of oil. Limit high-fat toppings such as gravy, creamy and cheesy sauces, and rich salad dressings. Also, pay attention to portion sizes – many of us eat more than we realise, which can easily lead to overeating.

Preparing meals at home in a healthy way is a skill that gets easier with practice. A dietitian or a healthcare professional can give you personalised tips and support, so ask your doctor about these options if you would like more guidance and information. You can also use smartphones apps to track your food choices, learn healthier cooking techniques, and build lasting habits.

Eat to help your heart

Along with limiting certain foods, it's just as important to eat more of the foods that protect your heart. Fresh or frozen fruits and vegetables are both great options. Aim to include whole grains (like oats, brown rice, or whole-wheat bread), nuts, and legumes (such as beans, chickpeas, or lentils) in your meals regularly. These foods provide fibre, healthy fats, and nutrients that can help lower cholesterol and improve your overall heart health.

Avoid alcohol

Alcohol consumption does not have any health benefits, so it is best to limit or avoid alcoholic drinks altogether. Be sure to consult your healthcare provider for personalised advice on how alcohol may affect your health.

MEAL PREP TIPS FROM OUR MEMBERS

Managing a new diet can feel overwhelming at first. Start by listing your goals and focusing on the most important steps. As you develop new, healthier habits, you can gradually take on more. Throughout the process, continue to follow any dietary or fluid guidelines your doctor has given you.

♡ Plan your meals for the week ahead

♡ Prepare extra food and freeze it, to avoid eating store-bought microwave meals that are high in salt and fat

♡ Use measuring cups and spoons to help you follow portion sizes recommended by your doctors or dietitian

♡ Use a smaller plate. A luncheon-sized plate (about 23 cm or 9 inches) can help control portions – it also helps your brain feel satisfied with less food

♡ Ask for support. Involve friends or family in your heart-healthy goals. Preparing and sharing meals together can make the changes feel easier – and more enjoyable.

HOW TO READ THE NUTRITION INFORMATION ON PREPACKED FOOD

All prepackaged food sold in the EU requires a nutrition information label that informs consumers about its energy and nutrient content[7]. This label, known as a Nutrition Declaration, must include:

Energy value – this indicates the amount of energy you will get from the food, and it is measured in kilojoules (kJ) and kilocalories (kcal – often referred to as "calories"). Calories consumed should be in balance with the ones burned.

Fat – this shows the total grams of fat in the food, including both healthy fats and saturated fats, which are considered less healthy.

Carbohydrates – this represents the total amount of carbohydrates, including sugars, in the food.

Proteins – this indicates the amount of protein (essential for building and repairing tissues) in the food, in grams.

Salt – this shows the amount of salt in the food, in grams. Talk to your doctor to determine your recommended daily salt intake.

Nutrition Facts

Per 100 g	
Energy	485 KJ / 117 kcal
Fat	8 g
Of which Saturates	3,7 g
Carbohydrate	9 g
Of which Sugars	8 g
Protein	1,4 g
Salt	0,02 g
Vitamin C	14,81 mg 19% RI*

Salt content is exclusively due to the presence of naturally occuring sodium.

*Reference intake of an average adult (8 400 KJ / 2 000 kcal)

INGREDIENTS: Mandarin Oranges (37.9%), Light Whipping Cream (**Milk**), Pears (12.4%), Peaches (7.7%), Thompson Seedless Grapes (7.6%), Apple (7.5%), Banana (5.9%), English Walnuts (**Tree Nuts**)
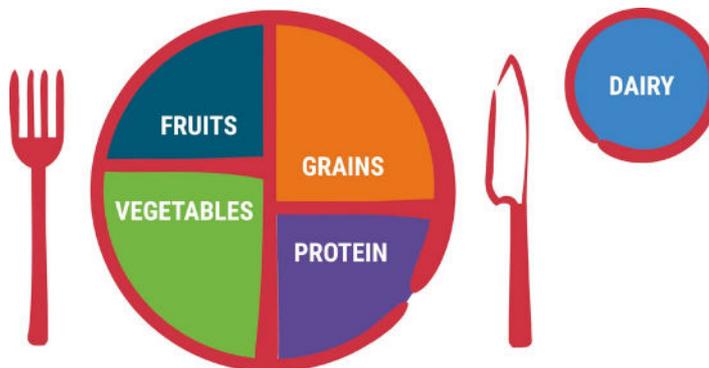
CHOOSE YOUR PLATE

A balanced diet includes a variety of foods such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains, nuts, and lean proteins. It should be low in saturated and trans fats, sugars, and salt, while high in fibre[8]. Portion control is also vital to align calorie intake with energy needs. For personalised guidance, it is beneficial to consult with a nutritionist or dietician who can help tailor a meal plan suited to individual factors like height, weight, and overall health goals.

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7   European Commission, 'Nutrition Declaration – EU Labelling Rules', Your Europe, https://europa.eu/youreurope/business/product-requirements/food-labelling/nutrition-declaration/index_en.htm
8   World Health Organization, 'Healthy Diet', WHO Fact Sheets, 29 April 2020, https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/healthy-diet

Top 10
exercise
tips ⊕

**DOWNLOAD THE
TIPS HERE**

Healthy
Habit Tracker

**DOWNLOAD THE
FORM HERE** ⊕

3. Get regular physical activity

Being active is just as important as eating a healthy diet for your heart health. The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends aiming for at least 150-300 minutes of moderate activity per week – but you do not have to do it all at once. You can break it into short sessions, such as 5-10 minutes at a time, and build up gradually.

When starting, remember that the small steps count. For some people, that might mean walking a lap around the house, stretching each morning, or going up and down one flight of stairs. Choose one activity you can add to your day and keep it. Increase the intensity when you feel ready.

Regular physical activity can help control blood pressure, cholesterol, and diabetes, and maintain a healthy weight – important because excess weight can put extra strain on your heart. If you have limited mobility or other challenges, ask your healthcare provider about safe alternatives.

Always check with your doctor before starting a new exercise program. They can suggest activities suited to your health and may refer you to trained professionals.

THE IMPORTANT THING IS TO MOVE MORE IN WAYS YOU ENJOY. WHEN YOU LIKE WHAT YOU ARE DOING, YOU ARE MORE LIKELY TO MAKE IT A LASTING HABIT.

Medication Tracker ⊕

DOWNLOAD THE FORM HERE

Reduce stress

One of the added benefits of regular physical activity and exercise is that often it can help lower stress levels – which may support your heart in many ways. Try gentle exercises, deep breathing, stretching and other activities that help release tension in both your body and mind.

Healthy Habit Tracker

At Mended Hearts, we have created a simple and easy-to-use Healthy Habit Tracker to support you as you build heart-healthy routines. It is designed to help you start making small changes to your eating and activity habits – and to feel stronger and confident over time.

You choose the habits you want to focus on and track them using the form provided. Once you feel those habits have become part of your routine, you can select new ones to work on. It is a helpful way to stay motivated and on track with your goals.

4. Take medication as prescribed

Some people with high cholesterol will benefit from taking medication. If your doctor prescribes medicine, make sure you understand what you are taking, when to take it, what it is for, possible side effects, and which side effects should prompt a call to your prescribing physician.

Medication tracker

Use this medication tracker to keep a clear record of your medicines — not just when to take them, but also what each one is for and any possible side effects. If you take more than one medicine, you can print one for each medication and keep them together to bring to your medical appointments.

5. Know your family history and get regular screenings

Some high cholesterol levels are inherited, so it's important to tell your doctor if relatives have had heart attacks or other heart diseases, especially at a young age. Regular check-ups and screenings can help you and your healthcare provider monitor your heart health and take action early if needed.

6. Make additional lifestyle adjustments

Adopting healthy lifestyle habits can significantly help you keep your cholesterol at healthy levels and improve your overall well-being.

Stop smoking – Smoking—and even exposure to second-hand smoke—greatly increases your risk of heart disease, stroke, lung conditions, and cancer. Chewing tobacco and vaping are also harmful. The good news? Quitting brings immediate benefits: it can improve your blood pressure, breathing, and heart rate. Talk to your doctor about support options, including programs and groups that can help you take the first step toward a smoke-free life.

Reduce or manage stress – While some stress is normal, excessive stress raises blood pressure, complicates breathing, and accelerates heart rate. Unhealthy coping mechanisms like overeating, drinking or smoking should be avoided. Instead, find healthy ways to relax and manage stress, such as meditation, or spending some time outside. If stress and anxiety persist, seek help from a healthcare provider for therapist or support group referrals.

Get enough sleep – Ideally, adults should aim for seven to eight hours of sleep per night. Create a comfortable environment, avoid eating heavy meals and drinking alcohol before bedtime, and maintain a consistent sleep schedule.

To help you make lifestyle adjustments that are useful for you, ask yourself the right questions to help you understand your habits, spot areas for improvement, and know what to discuss with your doctor. Reflect on these topics to guide your next steps toward better heart health:

Your diet

♡ What does my daily diet look like?

♡ Do I eat enough fruits, vegetables, and lean proteins like fish, chicken, and beans?

♡ Do I drink enough water?

♡ Do I rely on fast food or convenience foods because they are easier?

♡ Do I have access to healthy, affordable foods?

Your physical activity

♡ How active am I right now?

♡ Do I have physical limitations that affect my ability to exercise?

♡ Do I have a safe place to be active?

♡ What activities do I enjoy, and which ones are best for my health?

♡ Could I use online exercise classes or routines?

Your stress management

♡ How do I usually cope with stress?

♡ Do I understand how stress affects my heart health?

♡ Am I making time each day to relax?

♡ Do I use breathing exercises, meditation, or other relaxation techniques?

Your sleep

♡ How much sleep do I get each night?

♡ Do I have a consistent bedtime and wake-up time?

♡ Do I do things that help me fall asleep more easily?

♡ Do I understand how sleep affects my weight, stress, and heart health?

♡ Could I have a sleep disorder?
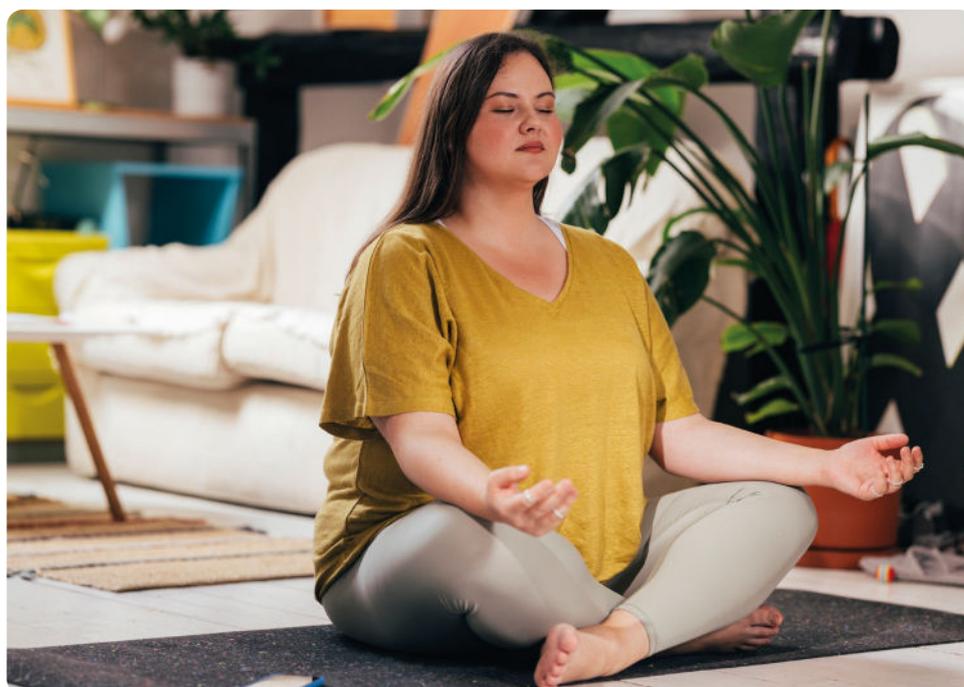
7. Get Connected

Connecting with others who have a similar diagnosis can help you feel supported and help you stay on track with your health goals.

♡ **Peer Support** – Getting support from another patient can help you better understand your condition and make lifestyle changes.

♡ **Supporting Others** – By sharing your experience, you can help others facing the same challenges. Connecting with others is an essential part of becoming the best version of yourself.

Explore more *GoToGuides*

Find other trusted, patient-friendly resources designed to support you at different stages, from diagnosis to living well day-to-day.

READ THEM ONLINE HERE.

ABOUT MENDED HEARTS EUROPE

Mended Hearts Europe (MHE) is a non-profit organisation dedicated to fostering hope and enhancing the lives of cardiovascular disease patients of all ages, their families, and caregivers. Through ongoing peer-to-peer support, patient education, and advocacy, its mission is to build a community characterised by resilience, care, and collective strength in overcoming challenges. Headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland, MHE marks the expansion of The Mended Hearts, Inc. (MHI) into Europe.