



Basic Health Info

The Portfolio Diet: The Natural Way to Lower Your Cholesterol

By Chet Zelasko, PhD

This is a typical scenario. You've gone to your doctor. Your doctor informs you that your cholesterol is too high and you need start using a medication. That's when you call me or write to say you want to do things the natural way, without medications. Most people just want to know which supplements they can take, but that isn't what this is about. This is about a dietary approach called the Portfolio Diet that has been proven to be as effective as a statin medication to lower cholesterol, especially LDL cholesterol.

But slow down—don't stop taking your meds just because you start following this diet. *Never stop taking a medication without your doctor's okay.* If you have good results with the Portfolio Diet, your doctor may agree to let you wean yourself off your meds, or your doctor may agree to let you try the Portfolio Diet before you start taking a medication. Show this Basic Health Info to your doctor if you like—one of the reasons I give you the references is so you can share this with your doctors and they can look up the studies for themselves. But no matter what the state of your health is, establishing an honest partnership with your doctor is one of the best health tips you'll ever get.

Now let's review the research and look at practical ways you can naturally lower your cholesterol.

Research

Researchers in Canada have published several studies on the effects of a specific dietary approach to lower cholesterol they call a dietary portfolio, hence the name Portfolio Diet. They selected foods that have demonstrated ability to lower cholesterol and have approved health claims associated with them: soy protein, almonds, viscous fiber, and plant sterols.

What makes their approach unique is that two of the studies compared a conventional low-fat diet, a low-fat diet plus a statin medication, and a diet that was lower in fat and included several specific foods (1-2). The studies were short—about a month—but the low-fat diet plus statin and the Portfolio Diet both resulted in a similar 30% decrease in LDL-cholesterol.

While short-term studies are interesting, it's important to have a longer trial on the diet. Will people follow it and will the beneficial results be maintained? The answer seems to be yes based on the results of a study published by the same researchers (3); 55 of 66 subjects completed a year-long study following the Portfolio Diet. While the results were not as dramatic, subjects were able to sustain a 13% reduction in LDL-cholesterol for the entire year. But the subjects did not follow the diet perfectly. In the short-term studies, food was provided to them. In the year-long trial, they were given guidelines to follow and, as you might expect, didn't follow them perfectly. They ate more animal protein than subjects in the month-long studies and didn't get the same quantity of all components of the Portfolio Diet. But here's the good news: the closer they followed the diet, the more they reduced their LDL-cholesterol.

Think what a 13% reduction would mean—someone with an LDL-cholesterol of 100 mg/dl could drop it to 87; 130 could drop to 113. If their patients would actually do it, that would satisfy many doctors.

Your question may be whether the Portfolio Diet is easy to follow. Let me be honest—it will be challenging if you really love a meat-and-potatoes diet. So how badly do you want to avoid medication? The idea of reducing your intake of animal protein and saturated fat may suddenly become more attractive.

The quantity of food recommended was isocaloric. In other words, it was designed to help subjects maintain their weight, not lose weight. I'll give you the amounts of each component based on the average caloric consumption of the subjects (1,800 calories per day) as well as the amount per 1,000 calories so you can adjust your intake of each item to your daily calorie goal. I'll also give some examples of the foods that would fit into each category. The foods are commonly available from your supermarket, don't take hours of preparation, and are palatable for the most part. I say that because most of us don't eat lentils and other vegetable sources of protein as much as we could, but they're an easy way to reach your fiber and protein objectives.

One thing you must do is measure the amounts of each component on a scale. I use a digital postal scale because I find it very accurate and it was inexpensive. But whatever method you use, it will help if you weigh the food rather than measure it, at least until you can get a good handle on the amount by sight.

The Portfolio Diet

Caloric Goal: 1,800 calories

Almonds – 42 grams per day (23 grams per 1,000 calories)

This represents about 1.5 ounces of almonds or about 34 whole kernels. Blanched or dry roasted are best because that keeps the fat content to just what's in the nuts. Almond butter can be used if you wanted to make it part of a sandwich—whole grain bread or pita, of course—or spread it on celery or apples.

Plant Sterols – 1.8 grams (2 grams per 1,000 calories)

The best source of plant sterols is—you guessed it—vegetables and fruits. But most of us don't eat enough vegetables and fruits, so bump that up in your diet. The closer to 10 servings you get every day, the better. You'll also be getting some from the almonds you're going to eat.

Realistically, you may want to add some products with added plant sterols: margarine spreads such as Benecol[®] or Promise Activ[®]. Promise[®] also puts plant sterols in the SuperShot[®] drinks and Minute Maid[®] in their Heart Wise[®] orange juice. You have more choices today than five years ago when the study began, so read labels and look for the words “plant sterols.”

Viscous/Soluble Fiber – 18 grams (10 grams per 1,000 calories)

The study recommended fiber from oats, barley, psyllium, okra, and eggplant. If those foods have one thing in common, it's a slimy texture. Don't let that stop you if you want to lower your cholesterol. One cup of oatmeal per day gets you 4 grams of fiber. One half-cup serving of sliced okra gets you 2 grams of fiber. You don't have to limit yourself to just those foods on the list—add some variety. One-half cup of frozen peas is 5 grams of fiber, and a half cup of cooked navy beans is almost 10 grams. Fiber from all sources has been shown to lower cholesterol.

I would also recommend my fiber cocktail twice a day: 2 teaspoons of guar gum and 1 teaspoon of psyllium fiber mixed in 4 to 8 ounces of water. That will give you another 6 to 8 grams of fiber.

Soy Protein – 40 grams (22.5 grams per 1,000 calories)

This one is relatively simple. You can use a soy-protein powder and add it to your oatmeal or soup, cook it in your barley, or put it in other foods you typically eat. Or you can use the hundreds of vegetarian products

that are based on soy protein. They range from hot dogs to burgers to bacon. Just make sure you get that amount of soy protein every day.

One More Thing...

In a recent study, subjects who added about one cup of strawberries per day got an additional benefit (4): their LDL cholesterol was less oxidized than a comparative group of subjects who just added oat-bran fiber to their diet. That's important because while any LDL-cholesterol is bad, it's even worse when it's oxidized. Reducing oxidation is important and doing it with strawberries is a great-tasting way to do that. The researchers speculate that other berries would have similar benefits, so make your Portfolio Diet even tastier by adding at least a cup of berries every day—fresh or frozen, it doesn't matter.

The Bottom Line

You've always told me you want to do things the natural way—okay, here it is. Let me stress that while it's certainly more vegetarian than not, the subjects who got a significant benefit didn't follow the diet perfectly. Find a way to incorporate most elements of the Portfolio Diet into your daily life along with reducing your intake of animal protein and saturated fat, and I think you'll find the results for your health are well worth it.

References

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Dr. Chet Zelasko is dedicated to helping men and women get healthy and fit. As a health and fitness consultant with a PhD in Exercise Physiology and Health Education from Michigan State University, he provides health information based on the most recent research and delivers it in a way that's easy to understand. Whether in person during seminars, in audio recordings, or in the written word, he makes sense out of the health news people hear so they can make better health choices and achieve optimal health. He's conducted research and been published in peer-reviewed journals. He is certified by the American College of Sports Medicine as a Health and Fitness Specialist and has taught in ACSM certification workshops throughout the United States; he also belongs to the American Society of Nutrition. Although Grand Rapids, Michigan, is home, he has presented seminars on health to groups all over North America, Mexico, and the Caribbean and has written extensively on the health benefits of a good diet, regular exercise, and targeted supplementation.

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