



Plant sterols and stanols

What are plant sterols and stanols?

Sterols and stanols are naturally found in a range of plant sources such as vegetables, vegetable oils, nuts, grains, seeds and legumes. There is some evidence that they can help lower your unhealthy or 'bad' LDL cholesterol and reduce your risk of heart disease if you consume them as part of a heart healthy diet.

How do they work?

Plant sterols and stanols have a similar chemical structure to cholesterol and are thought to decrease the absorption of cholesterol in our intestine. This reduction in cholesterol absorption increases our liver's uptake of LDL cholesterol and as a result can reduce our blood LDL cholesterol levels. They seem to have no effect on the heart-friendly or 'good' HDL cholesterol levels or triglycerides.

How much do I need to eat a day to have an impact on my cholesterol levels?

Research suggests that if you consume around 2g of plant sterols/stanols/day, LDL cholesterol levels can be reduced by 10-15%, although this can vary from person to person. A healthy diet only provides a modest intake of sterols and stanols (160-400mg/day). As a result plant sterols and stanols have been added to some foods, such as yoghurts, yoghurt drinks, spreads and soft cheeses to help meet the 2g/d recommendation.

To sustain LDL-cholesterol reductions from these products, you need to eat them daily and follow the manufacturer's instructions on recommended serving amounts to get the 2g of stanol or sterol.

2g of the plant sterol or stanol is generally equal to 1 yoghurt drink or 2-3 servings of spread, yoghurt or milk

Is it better taking a sterol or stanol?

Studies comparing the LDL lowering effect of sterols vs stanols have shown no difference between the two when you consume them as part of a healthy diet.

Can I take sterol or stanol products with cholesterol lowering medication?

You can take these products in addition to cholesterol lowering medications, but do tell your GP. They may have greater overall lowering effect on your cholesterol levels. If you do not have a high cholesterol level, there is no benefit to taking these products.

The Bottom Line

There is some evidence that plant stanols and sterols can help lower blood cholesterol levels. However, NICE (National Institute of Clinical Excellence) currently

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recommends you do not routinely take plant sterols and stanols to reduce your risk of heart and circulatory disease. It is important for you to continue to make heart healthy lifestyle changes. This means following a diet that is low in saturated fat and includes fruits, vegetables and oily fish, as well as keeping physically active, as well as maintaining a healthy weight and body shape.

If you decide to use these products you should follow the manufacturer's instructions on the recommended daily amounts. And remember they are not a substitute for a heart healthy diet or a replacement for cholesterol lowering drugs.

Plant stanols and sterols are not recommended for young children (less than 5 years), breastfeeding or pregnant women.

Further information

If you would like more information on healthy eating, please ask for our booklets *Eating for Your Heart*, *Reducing Your Blood Cholesterol*, *Cut the Saturated Fat* and *Eating Well*.

Lipid modification, NICE Clinical Guideline (May 2008) CG67; (*Cardiovascular risk assessment and the modification of blood lipids for the primary and secondary prevention of cardiovascular disease.*)

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