Keeping your cholesterol levels under control is one of the most important things you can do to protect your heart. But for those with borderline high readings, it can be worth trying to make lifestyle changes first – rather than immediately resorting to drugs like statins, already dished out to millions on the NHS.

If these adjustments do not have the desired effect, some patients may well end up on the pills.

But experts say many can do a lot more to help themselves, simply by making modest and manageable alterations to their everyday diet and lifestyles.

Follow our simple tips for driving down your cholesterol and enjoy a selection of heart-healthy recipes guaranteed to do you good.
SWITCH TO SOYA

THE range of soya-based foods in British supermarkets is greater than ever as more people switch to meat-free diets.

The UK market is worth more than £6 million – four times what it was a decade ago.

Tofu, soya mince, soya nuts, yogurts and soya-milk are just some of the healthy alternatives to meat and full-fat dairy goods high in saturated fat.

Soya is full of protein, healthy fats and a range of vitamins, minerals and plant nutrients and has been shown to lower cholesterol.

A 2019 study by doctors at St Michael’s Hospital in Toronto found a regular intake of soya-based foods lowered levels of ‘bad’ LDL cholesterol.

Although the decrease was small – around four percent – it could still help to protect against heart disease, the researchers said.

NIBBLE ON A HANDFUL OF NUTS

WHEN hunger pangs strike, it’s all too easy to reach for biscuits, cakes or chocolate to tide you over. But these are guaranteed to drive up your cholesterol levels.

Instead, try nibbling on a handful of nuts, which are packed with protein, fibre, vitamins and minerals like magnesium, potassium, zinc and copper.

Almonds, pistachios, walnuts, pecans, cashews and peanuts are all high in healthy unsaturated fat and low in harmful saturated fat – so they’re good for the heart.

A 2017 study in South Korea, for example, found snacking on a handful of almonds every day reduced dangerous LDL readings but left healthy HDL levels intact.
NO ONE food alone is going to banish raised cholesterol. But recent research suggests two apples a day can help to control it as part of a healthy lifestyle. Reading University researchers found the fruits contained high levels of fibre and disease-fighting compounds called polyphenols, which cut LDL cholesterol levels significantly in patients with readings bordering on dangerous. Crucially, another group of patients given an apple juice drink instead did not see the same benefits, according to a report in the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition.

FOR years, scientists have known that lack of sleep increases the risk of heart disease. But the reason why was something of a mystery. A 2016 study at the University of Helsinki came up with a possible explanation – poor sleepers have lower levels of healthy HDL cholesterol. This means the harmful LDL cholesterol in their blood is likely to do more harm. Scientists studied 21 volunteers who slept in a sleep laboratory for five nights in a row. Two thirds were woken every night after just four hours’ sleep and their cholesterol levels compared to others who got a full eight hours’ rest. The findings revealed HDL scores dropped significantly in those who were sleep deprived during the experiment.

EXERCISE is another useful way to control your cholesterol levels because it burns it up as fuel to keep muscles working. But you don’t have to run marathons – simply taking a walk can be enough. However, it has to be brisk – dawdling along at a snail’s pace is not going to have the desired effect. “It definitely helps control cholesterol and thereby reduces our risk of cardiovascular disease,” says Jules Payne, chief executive officer of the charity Heart UK. A 2013 study found walkers who exerted the same level of energy as runners burned the same number of calories and reduced their cholesterol by the same amount. Scientists said it’s not necessarily the type of exercise that counts but how much you do. For example, walking 4.3 miles at a brisk pace uses up the same amount of energy as running three miles.
GOING without food, or more than halving the number of calories you normally eat, may be a drastic way to tackle high cholesterol but some research suggests it can work – even if it’s just for one day a week. There is some evidence that calorie restriction can drive down levels of bad cholesterol (LDL), as well as improve the way the body metabolises sugar – reducing weight gain and the risk of diabetes. But try not to fast and exercise at the same time as it can cause dizziness and confusion.

FAST ON ONE DAY OF THE WEEK

AEROBIC exercise like walking, cycling or swimming has well-known benefits in terms of lowering cholesterol. What’s less well-known is that lifting weights – or resistance training – has the same effect. Again, it’s not about hoisting huge weights but using smaller ones to provide resistance for arm, leg and back muscles. A study in the journal Atherosclerosis looked at 30 men in their twenties doing regular resistance training and found it cleared harmful LDL cholesterol from their blood – reducing their risk of heart disease. But readings of HDL – the “good” cholesterol – did not drop.

START PUMPING IRON

PORRIDGE has enjoyed a resurgence in recent years – and with good reason. Oats contain a special type of soluble fibre, called beta glucan, which has been shown to lower cholesterol when eaten on a regular basis. It works by forming a kind of gel in the gut which can bind to cholesterol-rich molecules and stop them from being absorbed into the bloodstream. The British Heart Foundation says beta glucan can help with cholesterol as long as you have at least three grammes a day. A typical 40g serving of porridge contains two grammes of beta glucan.

WHY PORRIDGE IS THE PERFECT BREAKFAST
**HEART-HEALTH RECIPES TO KEEP CHOLESTEROL UNDER CONTROL**

**SARDINES AND PASTA**

**Ingredients**
Rapeseed oil spray; 1 finely diced onion; 3 fresh sardines or a can of sardines; 2tbsp tomato puree; half tbsp sun-dried tomato puree; 1tbsp toasted pine nuts; 1tbsp currants; 6 sliced and quartered cherry tomatoes; 1 roasted red pepper; half bag of fresh spaghetti or pasta shapes; fennel fronds

**Method:**
1. Heat a large frying pan and spritz four times with rapeseed oil spray. Add the onion and cook for a few minutes, until softened. Add the sardines, tomato puree and a ladle of water. Stir and cook gently for a few minutes.
2. Add the toasted pine nuts, currants, tomatoes and red pepper, cook for a further 10-15 minutes.
3. Meanwhile cook the pasta in boiling water for six minutes, then add to the sardine mix.
4. Season, stir and serve garnished with fennel, crusty bread and a salad.

**BAKED STUFFED CHICKPEA CUTLETS**

**Ingredients:**
2 tbsp cottage cheese; 2tbsp low-fat grated cheese; 2 cans chickpeas in water; 1tsp ginger and garlic paste; 1 chopped green chilli; 2tbsp chopped coriander leaves; 4tbsp natural low-fat yogurt; 1tsp dried mint; half cup wholemeal breadcrumbs; 3 sliced tomatoes

**Method:**
1. Mix cottage cheese and grated cheese together as a filling.
2. Drain the chickpeas and mash finely before adding ginger/garlic paste, chopped chilli, coriander, black pepper and two tablespoons of the yogurt and mix lightly.
3. Divide the mixture into 12 equal balls and stuff each with one teaspoon of the cheese filling. Cover the filling to form a flat round cutlet.
4. Mix two tablespoons of the remaining yogurt with mint and spread over the round cutlets.
5. Sprinkle each cutlet with breadcrumbs to coat on all sides and place on a lightly greased baking tray.
6. Bake at 180C for 20-25 minutes or until cooked through.
7. Serve garnished with sliced tomatoes.
COMING NEXT MONDAY: YOUR LIFETIME GUIDE TO GOOD GUT HEALTH

LEARN YOGA

STRETCHING your body while remaining mostly stationary might not seem like an obvious way to tackle high cholesterol.

But according to an analysis carried out by scientists at renowned Harvard University in the US, that’s precisely what yoga can do.

They pooled data from dozens of different studies and found regular yoga sessions led to significant falls in bad cholesterol levels, as well as weight and blood pressure.

Researchers said: “There is promising evidence that yoga can improve cardiac health.”

It’s not clear precisely how yoga helps keep arteries clear but it may be that the exercises involved burn up cholesterol in much the same way as aerobic work-outs.

FISH TIKKA

Ingredients

1 tbsp lemon juice; 1kg cubed cod fillets; half cup of low fat natural yoghurt; 1 tbsp garam masala; 2 tsp ground cumin seeds; 1 tsp chilli powder; 2 tsp garlic paste; veg oil for basting

Method:

1. Add lemon juice to the fish cubes and set aside for half an hour.

2. Combine everything else (except the oil) and mix well. Pour over the fish cubes and marinate for at least an hour.

3. Preheat oven to 175C/350F. Lightly grease a baking tray with veg oil, place fish cubes on tray and bake on the middle shelf until golden brown in colour and cooked through.

4. Serve hot with tomato chutney or salad.