

Cholesterol

Making Sense of Your Cholesterol

Cholesterol is a waxy, fat-like substance that's found in all cells of the body. Your body makes its own cholesterol to aid digestion and to make hormones and vitamin D. If you have high cholesterol, you have more cholesterol in your blood than your body needs.

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

High-density lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol is the “good” cholesterol. That's because it sweeps away cholesterol from your body to the liver, where it is removed. **High levels are generally good.**

Low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol is the bad guy. It can block your arteries. **Low levels are better.**

Blocked arteries are definitely ugly. Arteries are the blood vessels that carry blood with oxygen from your heart to the rest of your body. Blocked arteries reduce (block) the flow of oxygen-rich blood from your heart. This can lead to heart disease and heart attack. The higher the amount of LDL cholesterol in your blood, the higher your chances of getting heart problems.

In the United States, more than 73 million adults have high cholesterol. This doubles their chances of getting heart disease.

If you're 20 years old or older, have your cholesterol levels checked at least once every 5 years. Talk with your doctor about how often you should be tested. [NHLBI signs/symptoms]

Things You Can Do

You can keep your cholesterol levels in check by making healthy choices:

Watch what you eat. Cholesterol is found in some meats, dairy products, chocolate, baked goods, as well as fried and processed foods.

Exercise and watch your weight. This can help you lower your LDL cholesterol. Being physically active can help you raise your good cholesterol.

Don't smoke. It lowers good cholesterol, raises bad cholesterol, and damages your arteries.

Why Is My Cholesterol So High When I Have a Healthy Lifestyle?

Genetics plays a big role in how much cholesterol the body produces. Some people inherit genes that cause them to make too much cholesterol. Or, the body may not be able to absorb enough cholesterol. These people could still have high cholesterol even if they're not eating food that's high in cholesterol.

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People with other health problems may also have difficulty controlling their cholesterol levels.

Examples could be someone who has had a heart attack or stroke. Someone with diabetes or thyroid disease could have high cholesterol too.

How Low is Low Enough?

Today, experts recommend that cholesterol management focus less on numbers and more on *you*. Your healthcare provider will make a personalized plan for managing your cholesterol. The National Lipid Association guidelines set a goal of LDL cholesterol <100 mg/dL.

Information Your Provider Uses To Determine Your Heart Attack Risks

- The physical exam
- Your medical history (including family history)
- Laboratory test results
- Your lifestyle choices

An online calculator from the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute can help:

<http://cvdrisk.nhlbi.nih.gov/>

The calculator uses information such as your age, gender, blood pressure, and cholesterol levels. Then, it identifies your 10-year risk of having a heart attack. The calculator, however, is not a substitute for your healthcare provider. This is the person who knows the big picture of your overall health. She can put all the pieces together to best determine your risks.

To improve adherence, make sure you understand why you need your medication. Voice your concerns if your medication schedule is too complicated or costly. Sign up for pharmacy reminders or 90-day prescription delivery, if available. Always have an open dialog with your physician.

Today, there are new medicines that can help you reach your goals. Partner with your healthcare provider to find an approach that is best for you.