



High Cholesterol Information for Members

What is High Cholesterol?

Cholesterol is a type of fat called a [lipid](#). The body uses it for many things, like making new cells. Your liver makes the amount that your body needs. You also get it from the foods you eat.

Your body needs some cholesterol. But too much can build up in your arteries. Those are the blood vessels that carry blood away from the heart. This is called hardening of the arteries. It is also known as [atherosclerosis](#). It often happens slowly. It often worsens as you get older.

To understand how it works, think about a clog forming in the pipe under a kitchen sink. Like grease building up in the pipe, cholesterol can build up in your body. That narrows your arteries. Then it is harder for blood to flow. It lowers the amount of blood that gets to your body tissues, including your heart. This can lead to serious problems, including [heart attack](#) and [stroke](#).

A simple blood test tells you how much cholesterol you have. The test results are given in mg/dL of cholesterol. Most people just use the numbers. They help your doctor know your risk of heart attack. Your doctor will also take into account other factors. They include your age, blood pressure, family history, and if you smoke.

For a general idea about your total cholesterol number, compare your number to the following:

- **Best** is less than 200
- **Borderline-high** is 200 to 239
- **High** is 240 or above

What are the Different Types of Cholesterol?

Cholesterol travels through the blood along with a protein. This package is called a lipoprotein. They can be high-density or low-density, based on how much protein and fat they have.

- [Low-density lipoproteins \(LDL\)](#) are the “bad” cholesterol. LDL is mostly fat with only a small amount of protein. It can clog your arteries. If you have high cholesterol, your doctor will want you to lower your LDL.
- [High-density lipoproteins \(HDL\)](#) are the “good” cholesterol. HDL is more protein than fat. It helps clear the bad cholesterol from your blood so it does not clog your arteries. A high level of HDL can protect you from a heart attack.
- [Triglycerides](#) are another type of fat in the blood that can affect your health. If you have high triglycerides and high LDL, your chances of having a heart attack are higher.

It may help to think of HDL as the “Healthy” cholesterol. LDL is the “Lousy” cholesterol. Or you could remember that HDL should be High. And LDL should be Low.

Experts have come up with goals for each type of cholesterol. Your doctor will help you decide on your goals. They will be based on your risk of heart attack and stroke. Your doctor will help you know this risk. You can find your risk of a heart attack. Use the [Interactive Tool: Are You at Risk for a Heart Attack?](#)

- **LDL** should be low. Your LDL goal depends on your risk of heart attack and stroke. If you are at very high risk, your goal may be less than 70. If you are at high risk, your goal is less than 100. If you are at moderate risk, your goal is less than 130. If you are at low risk, your goal is less than 160.
- **HDL** should be high. A good HDL goal is 40 or higher. HDL over 60 helps protect against a heart attack. HDL below 40 increases your risk of heart problems. A high HDL number can help offset a high LDL number.
- **Triglycerides** should be less than 150. A level above 150 may increase your risk for heart problems.

What are the Symptoms?

High cholesterol doesn't make you feel sick. But it can build up in your arteries. It can block blood flow to your heart or brain. That can cause a heart attack or stroke. By the time you find out you have it, it may already be clogging your arteries. So it is very important to start treatment even though you may feel fine.

What Causes High Cholesterol?

Many things can cause high cholesterol, including:

- **Diet.** Eating too much saturated fat, trans fat, and cholesterol can raise your levels. Saturated fat, trans fat, and cholesterol are in foods that come from animals. That includes foods like meats, whole milk, egg yolks, butter, and cheese. And many packaged and snack foods like cookies, crackers, and chips.
- **Weight.** Being overweight may raise triglycerides and lower "good" HDL.
- **Activity level.** Not exercising may raise "bad" LDL and lower HDL.
- **Overall health.** Diseases such as hypothyroidism can raise your levels. Smoking may lower HDL.
- **Age.** Cholesterol starts to rise after age 20. In men, it usually levels off after age 50. In women, it stays fairly low until menopause. After that, levels rise to about the same levels as in men.
- **Family.** Some people inherit a rare disease called a lipid disorder. It can cause very high total cholesterol, very low HDL, and high triglycerides. If you have this problem, you will need to start treatment at a young age.

How is High Cholesterol Diagnosed?

Doctors use a blood test to check cholesterol.

- A fasting cholesterol test is the most complete test. It is also called a lipoprotein analysis. It measures total cholesterol, HDL, LDL, and triglycerides. You cannot have food for 9 to 12 hours before this test.
- A direct LDL test measures your LDL level only. You can have this test done at any time, even if you recently had a meal or snack.
- A simple test can measure total cholesterol and HDL. You can eat before this test. Sometimes doctors do this test first. If it shows you have high cholesterol or low HDL. Then you will get a fasting test.

How is it Treated?

The two main treatments are lifestyle changes and medicines. The goal of treatment is to lower your "bad" LDL and reduce your risk of a heart attack. You may also need to raise your "good" HDL. A high level of HDL helps reduce your risk of heart problems.

Some lifestyle changes are important for everyone with high cholesterol. Your doctor will probably want you to:

- Follow the Therapeutic Lifestyle Changes (TLC) diet. The goal is to reduce the amount of saturated fat you eat. That can lower your cholesterol. The TLC diet helps you learn to make better food choices. That includes picking lean meats, low-fat or nonfat products, and good fats like olive and canola oils.

- Lose weight, if you need to. Losing just 5 lb. to 10 lb. (2.3 kg to 4.5 kg) can lower your cholesterol and triglycerides. That can also help lower your blood pressure.
- Be more active. Exercise can raise your “good” HDL. It may also help you control your weight.
- Quit smoking, if you smoke. Quitting can help raise your HDL. It can also improve your heart health.

Sometimes lifestyle changes are enough on their own. You may try others for a few months and they may not lower your levels enough. In that case, your doctor may prescribe a cholesterol-lowering medicine called a statin. You also may need medicines to lower triglycerides or raise HDL.

You may need to start taking medicine right away if your cholesterol is very high. You may also need to start taking it if you have another problem that increases your chance of a heart attack. People with a high risk benefit from taking higher doses of statins to lower their LDL as much as possible. The more these people can lower their LDL, the less likely they are to have a heart attack.¹ To find out your risk, use the Interactive Tool: Are You at Risk for a Heart Attack?

It is important to take your medicine just the way your doctor tells you to. If you stop taking your medicine, your levels will go back up. You need to get checked regularly. That can help your doctor know if lifestyle changes have helped. You may also need more or different medicines.

References

Healthwise, Incorporated. High Cholesterol. Author: Robin Parks, MS. Medical Review: E. Gregory Thompson, MD (Internal Medicine), Robert A. Kloner, MD, PhD (Cardiology). July 11, 2008.

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