



# Understanding cholesterol

Cholesterol is a waxy, fat-like substance. It occurs naturally in the body. It helps produce cell membranes and some hormones. It also serves other functions. Having too much in your blood can cause it to stick to the walls of your arteries. High levels can increase your risk for a stroke or heart disease.

## Signs

You are more likely to have high cholesterol if:

- You are overweight.
- You eat lots of fatty foods.
- Family members have it.

## Types

There are two types of cholesterol. Too much of one type or not enough of the other can put you at risk for stroke, heart disease or a heart attack.

- LDL delivers cholesterol to the body. Too much in the blood can clog arteries. That is why it is called the bad cholesterol. This increases the risk of stroke or a heart attack.
- HDL helps remove cholesterol from the blood stream. That is why it is known as the good cholesterol.

Triglyceride is a form of fat. High triglycerides often mean a high total cholesterol level. High triglyceride levels are caused by:

- Smoking.
- Too much alcohol.
- Not exercising.
- Being overweight.
- A diet high in carbohydrates.

## When should my cholesterol be checked?

You should have a cholesterol test if:

- You have heart disease or have had a stroke.
- You are age 35 or over with a family history of diabetes, high blood pressure or early heart disease.
- You are a smoker.

## How are cholesterol levels tested?

Cholesterol is measured with a blood test. This should be done every five years. It will show cholesterol levels in milligrams per deciliter of blood (mg/dL). This can determine risk of heart disease. It will show your LDL and HDL levels, triglyceride level and total cholesterol level.

## What do the numbers mean?

### LDL cholesterol level

- Optimal – less than 100 mg/dL
- Near/above optimal – 100 to 129 mg/dL
- Borderline high – 130 to 159 mg/dL
- High – 160 to 189 mg/dL
- Very high – 190 mg/dL and above

### HDL cholesterol level

- Low – A level less than 40 mg/dL increases risk of heart disease

### Triglyceride level

- Normal – less than 150 mg/dL
- Borderline high – 150 to 199 mg/dL
- High – 200 to 499 mg/dL
- Very high – 500 mg/dL
- Very high – 500 mg/dL

### Total blood cholesterol level

This is the sum of all the cholesterol in your blood. The higher it is the greater your risk for heart disease.

- Desirable – less than 200 mg/dL
- Borderline high – 200 to 239 mg/dL
- High risk – 240 mg/dL and over

## Ways to lower your cholesterol

You can lower your cholesterol and keep it under control by:

- Changing diet.
- Following your doctor's advice.
- Exercising regularly.
- Managing your weight.
- Getting it tested every five years.
- Taking medicine to lower it if needed.

## The right foods

Eating the right foods can help lower your cholesterol:

- Avoid fast food restaurants.
- Avoid foods high in sodium.
- Limit your sugar and alcohol.
- Eat fish three or more times a week.
- Use healthy oils such as canola and olive oil.
- Eat five servings of fruits and vegetables a day.
- Eat more complex carbohydrates and fiber like whole-grain breads and cereals.
- Eat more lean protein such as egg whites and skinless chicken.

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