

What is high cholesterol and what are the health risks?

Cholesterol is a soft, fat-like, waxy substance that is used by the body to produce cell membranes, make certain hormones and to help with other body functions. The body makes its own cholesterol, and many of the foods we eat on a regular basis, especially animal products, contain cholesterol as well.

The body cannot dissolve cholesterol, so the excess is often deposited in the blood vessels. Too much cholesterol buildup can lead to heart disease and stroke.

There are two major types of cholesterol found in the body:

- Low-density lipoprotein (LDL). This is known as "bad" cholesterol, and is brought into the body through certain foods. Excess LDL cholesterol is deposited in the arteries, increasing the risk of heart disease and stroke. LDL levels lower than 130 or total cholesterol levels less than 200 are considered desirable; LDL levels between 130 and 159 or total cholesterol levels between 200 and 239 are considered borderline; and LDL levels greater than 160 or total levels above 240 are considered high.
- High-density lipoprotein (HDL). This is known as "good" cholesterol, and is produced by the body in order to help prevent LDL cholesterol buildup in the arteries. Low HDL levels increase heart disease risk. HDL levels less than 35 are considered to be low.

A number of risk factors can contribute to high levels of LDL cholesterol:

- Heredity. High cholesterol often tends to run in families, although the exact explanation for this is still unknown. A family history of early heart disease also increases the chances of heart disease.
- Weight. Being overweight can increase blood cholesterol, while losing weight can help to decrease blood cholesterol.
- Exercise. Regular physical activity has been shown to both lower LDL cholesterol levels and increase HDL cholesterol levels.
- Age. Cholesterol levels increase as we get older. Menopausal women also tend to have increased LDL cholesterol levels.
- Gender. Women tend to have lower total cholesterol levels than do men.

Smoking, high blood pressure, diabetes, obesity and physical inactivity, along with high blood cholesterol, can increase the risk of heart disease risk.

Lifestyle changes, such as reduced-fat diets, increased exercise and weight loss, can help to bring cholesterol levels under control. In addition, these lifestyle changes can have other positive health effects, such as leading to lower blood pressure. If diet and exercise changes do not lead to lower cholesterol, your doctor can prescribe cholesterol-lowering drug therapy.

Resources

- United States Food and Drug Administration: www.fda.gov
- United States Department of Agriculture Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion: www.nutrition.gov
- National Institutes of Health (NIH): <http://nih.gov>

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