

Cholesterol

Cholesterol is a soft substance found among the fats in the bloodstream and in body cells. Cholesterol plays an important role in developing a healthy body because it helps form cell membranes, hormones and several other components necessary for good physical health. However, when there is too much cholesterol in your blood, it builds up in the walls of your arteries.

Good and Bad Cholesterol

Cholesterol and other fats cannot dissolve in the blood. They have to be transported to and from the cells by special carriers called lipoproteins. There are several kinds of lipoproteins, but the most well-known are low-density lipoprotein (LDL) and high-density lipoprotein (HDL).

- Low-density lipoprotein, commonly called the "bad" cholesterol, is carried into the bloodstream and is the main cause of harmful fatty buildup in arteries. The higher the low-density lipoprotein cholesterol level is in your blood, the greater your risk of developing heart disease.
- High-density lipoprotein, or the "good" cholesterol, carries blood cholesterol back to the liver where it is broken down. High-density lipoprotein helps prevent cholesterol buildup in blood vessels, so it is advantageous to have a high high-density lipoprotein level.

Where Does Cholesterol Come From?

People get cholesterol in two ways. The liver and several other organs in the body produce about 1,000 milligrams of cholesterol each day. Foods people eat can also contain cholesterol. Foods from animals (especially egg yolks, meat, poultry, fish, seafood and whole-milk dairy products) contain it. Plant-based foods like fruits, vegetables, grains, nuts and seeds do not contain cholesterol.

Typically, the body makes all of the cholesterol it needs, so people do not need to consume it. Saturated fatty acids are the main culprit in raising blood cholesterol, which increases your risk of heart disease. Trans fats also raise blood cholesterol. However, dietary cholesterol also plays a part. The average person consumes around 290 milligrams a day.

What Your Cholesterol Numbers Mean

Everyone age 20 and older should have their cholesterol measured at least once every five years. It is best to have a blood test called a "lipoprotein profile" to find out your cholesterol numbers. This blood test is done after a nine- to 12-hour fast and gives information about your:

- Total cholesterol
- Low-density lipoprotein (bad) cholesterol
- High-density lipoprotein (good) cholesterol

- Triglycerides.

A lipoprotein profile allows you to view the levels of all types of cholesterol individually. If it is not possible to get a lipoprotein profile done, knowing your total cholesterol and high-density lipoprotein cholesterol can give you a general idea about your cholesterol levels.

Cholesterol levels are measured in milligrams (mg) of cholesterol per deciliter (dL) of blood. Interpret your total cholesterol numbers using this breakdown:

- If your total cholesterol level is less than 200 milligrams/deciliter, you fall in the "desirable" cholesterol category.
- If your total cholesterol level is between 201 and 239 milligrams/deciliter, you fall in the "borderline high" cholesterol category.
- If your total cholesterol level is over 240 milligrams/deciliter, you fall in the "high" cholesterol category.

How to Lower Your Cholesterol Levels

High blood cholesterol itself does not cause symptoms, so many people are unaware that their cholesterol level is too high. It is important to find out what your cholesterol numbers are because lowering cholesterol levels that are too high lessens the risk of developing heart disease and reduces the chance of a heart attack or dying of heart disease, even if you already have it.

Age, gender and heredity are three things that can influence your cholesterol level, but you cannot do anything about these variables. There are, however, several factors that can affect your cholesterol levels that you can do something about:

- **Diet:** Saturated fat and cholesterol in the food you eat makes your blood cholesterol level go up. Saturated fat is the main culprit, but cholesterol in foods also matters. Reducing the amount of saturated fat and cholesterol in your diet helps lower your blood cholesterol level. Look for foods low in saturated fat, including fat-free or 1 percent dairy products, lean meats, fish, skinless poultry, whole grain foods, fruits, and vegetables. Look for soft margarine (liquid or tub varieties) that are low in saturated fat and contain little or no trans fat. Limit your consumption of foods high in cholesterol, such as liver and other organ meats, egg yolks, and full-fat dairy products.
- **Weight:** Being overweight is a risk factor for heart disease. It also tends to increase your cholesterol level. Losing weight can help lower your low-density lipoprotein and total cholesterol levels, as well as raise your high-density lipoprotein and lower your triglyceride levels.
- **Physical activity:** Not being physically active is a risk factor for heart disease. Regular physical activity can help lower low-density lipoprotein (bad) cholesterol and raise high-density lipoprotein (good) cholesterol levels. It also helps you lose weight. You should try to be physically active for 30 minutes on most if not all, days.

Some of the excess dietary cholesterol is removed from the body through the liver. Still, the American Heart Association recommends that you limit your average daily cholesterol intake to less than 300 milligrams. If you have heart disease, limit your daily intake to less than 200 milligrams. Remember that by keeping your dietary intake of saturated fats low, you can significantly lower your dietary cholesterol intake. Foods high in saturated fat generally contain substantial amounts of dietary cholesterol.

People with severe high blood cholesterol levels may need an even greater reduction. Since cholesterol is in all foods from animal sources, care must be taken to eat no more than 0.17 kilograms of lean meat, fish and poultry per day and to use fat-free and low-fat dairy products. High-quality proteins from vegetable sources, such as beans, are good substitutes for animal sources of protein.

Using Medication to Lower Cholesterol Levels

There are several types of drugs available for cholesterol-lowering, including statins, bile acid sequestrants, nicotinic acid, fibric acids and cholesterol absorption inhibitors. Your doctor can help decide which type of drug is best for you.

The statin drugs are very effective in lowering low-density lipoprotein levels and are safe for most people. Bile acid sequestrants also lower low-density lipoprotein and can be used alone or in combination with statin drugs. Nicotinic acid lowers low-density lipoprotein and triglycerides and raises high-density lipoprotein. Fibric acids lower low-density lipoprotein somewhat but are used mainly to treat high triglyceride and low high-density lipoprotein levels. Cholesterol absorption inhibitors lower low-density lipoprotein and can be used alone or in combination with statin drugs.

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