

Info Sheet

Cholesterol: What You Should Know

A lot of people seem to know that high cholesterol is bad for you. Even so, many people don't know what their own cholesterol level is or whether they should do anything about it. If you're one of them, do yourself a favor; find out what your cholesterol level is, and ask your doctor if it's a problem.

Your cholesterol level affects your risk of developing heart disease and of having a heart attack or a stroke. That's because cholesterol, which is found in the blood, can build up in the walls of your arteries. As cholesterol builds up, it can narrow and harden the arteries, making it more difficult for blood to travel through them. This condition is called atherosclerosis. It can affect arteries throughout the body, and it can be called different things depending on which part of the body is affected.

When atherosclerosis affects the heart, it is called coronary artery disease. A heart attack happens when the arteries in the heart get so clogged that blood cannot pass through, or when the fatty deposits inside the heart's arteries rupture. A stroke happens when the blood vessels feeding the brain get clogged.

The higher your cholesterol, the higher the risk of a heart attack, stroke, and other related complications. Luckily, there's lots you can do to lower your cholesterol – and therefore your risk.

Understanding Your Cholesterol Numbers

Everyone age 20 and older should have a cholesterol test at least once every 5 years. People with diabetes or coronary artery disease should have it measured at least once a year. Doctors measure cholesterol with a blood test called a "cholesterol" or "lipid" profile. If you haven't had one of these tests recently enough, ask your doctor about it.

The types of blood fats (also known as lipids) measured in cholesterol or lipid profiles include:

- Total cholesterol;
- LDL cholesterol, which stands for low-density lipoprotein cholesterol;
- HDL cholesterol, which stands for high-density lipoprotein cholesterol; and
- Triglycerides, another type of fat found in the blood.

LDL cholesterol is considered "bad" because it is the type that accumulates on artery walls. HDL cholesterol is considered "good" because it helps remove bad cholesterol from the bloodstream.

The simplest cholesterol test, which can be done without any preparation, measures total and HDL cholesterol. A more involved test, called a lipoprotein profile, can be done only after 9 to 12 hours of fasting. This test measures LDL cholesterol and triglycerides, as well as total and HDL cholesterol. However, a lipoprotein profile isn't necessary unless your total cholesterol is greater than 200 milligrams/deciliter or your HDL is less than 40 mg/dL.

The following tables will help you understand where your cholesterol levels fall.

Total Cholesterol Level	Category
Less than 200 mg/dL	Desirable
200-239 mg/dL	Borderline high
240 mg/dL and above	High

LDL Cholesterol Level	LDL-Cholesterol Category
Less than 100 mg/dL	Optimal
100-129 mg/dL	Near optimal/above optimal
130-159 mg/dL	Borderline high
160-189 mg/dL	High
190 mg/dL and above	Very high

HDL (good) cholesterol protects against heart disease, so for HDL, higher numbers are better. A level below 40 mg/dL is low and is considered problematic because it increases your risk for developing heart disease. HDL levels of 60 mg/dL or more help to lower your risk for heart disease.

HDL Cholesterol Level	HDL-Cholesterol Category
Less than 40 mg/dL	Low
60 mg/dL and above	Optimal

Triglycerides can also raise heart disease risk. Some people with levels that are borderline high (150-199 mg/dL) or high (200 mg/dL or more) may need treatment.

What Should Your Cholesterol Target Be?

If your total cholesterol or LDL cholesterol level is not optimal, your doctor may tell you that you need to lower it. He or she will give you a cholesterol target (or goal) to aim for.

Cholesterol alone is not the only factor that affects your risk of having a heart attack or a stroke, or of developing heart disease. If you have high cholesterol but are otherwise healthy, your risk may still be low. On the other hand, if you have high cholesterol, you smoke, you have high blood pressure, and you have a family history of heart disease, your risk may be high. Doctors assign people different cholesterol targets depending on their individual level of risk. Your doctor can give you a target based on your individual risk.

How to Lower Cholesterol

Anyone who needs to lower their cholesterol should make what doctors call “therapeutic lifestyle changes,” or TLC. These lifestyle changes involve changing your diet, increasing your physical activity, and managing your weight.

Regular physical activity can help raise HDL (good) cholesterol and lower LDL (bad) cholesterol. Meanwhile, losing weight if you are overweight can help lower LDL cholesterol. Diet is also very important because certain kinds of foods, especially those high in saturated fats, can increase your cholesterol levels.

People hoping to lower their cholesterol level should avoid or cut down on high-fat foods such as:

- Fatty meats, including sausage and cold cuts;
- Fast-food sandwiches;
- Fried foods, such as French fries or fried chicken;
- Baked goods, such as donuts, cookies, cakes, and pies; and
- Cheese, cream, butter, and ice cream.

A cholesterol-friendly diet should include lean meats and low-fat dairy products and also be high in fiber. Good sources of fiber include vegetables, fruits, beans, and oat bran, as well as whole-grain cereals, breads, and pastas.

Cholesterol-Lowering Medication

Some people can’t reach their target cholesterol levels with diet and exercise alone. Medications called statins are often prescribed to further reduce cholesterol levels. Other medications such as fibrates or nicotinic acid may be prescribed for some people, either instead of or in addition to statins.

Still, even if you are taking cholesterol-lowering medication, that does not make it “okay” to eat unhealthy foods. People taking statins still need to stick to a heart-healthy diet of lean meats, vegetables, fruits, and whole grains.

Call a Health Coach

If you have questions about your cholesterol levels or heart disease risk, call a Health Coach. Health Coaches are specially trained healthcare professionals, such as nurses, dietitians, and respiratory therapists, available by phone, anytime, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, at no charge to you.

Health Coaches can support you in finding ways to lower your cholesterol. When appropriate, a Health Coach can also mail additional information, including videotapes, at no charge. To talk to a Health Coach, call 1-877-LIFE –123 (1-877-543-3123). You can also get information online at LifeSteps Online.