

Cholesterol: Keeping Your Heart Healthy

What is cholesterol?

Cholesterol is a fat-like substance in foods such as egg yolks, poultry, meats, fish and dairy products. Your body also makes cholesterol in the liver from saturated fat in foods such as dairy foods (ice cream, butter), fat from meat and poultry, and baked goods like cookies and crackers. A lot of the news about cholesterol sounds bad, but everyone needs some cholesterol for good health. The important thing is not to have too much cholesterol.

How does too much cholesterol affect my body?

Too much cholesterol in your blood can affect your heart and blood vessels, and raise your risk of having a heart attack or stroke. “Bad” cholesterol (LDL) can build up in your arteries (large blood vessels) like gunk can build up in a drainpipe. If it builds up over a long period of time and completely blocks an artery that supplies blood to your heart, a heart attack occurs. If an artery that supplies blood to your brain becomes blocked, a stroke occurs.

How often should I have my cholesterol checked?

Men ages 35 to 65 and women ages 45 to 65 should have their cholesterol checked regularly. Other people with risk factors for heart disease (such as being overweight, smoking or having a family member with heart disease) may need to have it checked earlier or more often. Each person is different, and your family doctor will let you know what is best for you.

What the numbers mean

Total cholesterol levels

- Less than 200 is best
- Between 200 and 239 is borderline high
- 240 or more means increased risk for heart disease

LDL levels

(“bad” cholesterol)

- Less than 130 is best
- Between 130 and 159 is borderline high
- 160 or more means increased risk for heart disease

HDL levels

(“good” cholesterol)

- Less than 35 means increased risk for heart disease
- 60 or higher reduces the risk of heart disease

How can I lower my cholesterol?

Changing the way you eat is the best way to start, with help from your family doctor. It’s not as hard as it sounds. You don’t have to quit eating your favorite foods, just eat them less often and in smaller amounts. Your goal is to avoid foods that are high in cholesterol and saturated fats. It isn’t enough to just cut back on foods that have cholesterol. You also need to cut back on fat, especially saturated fat, because your body can turn it into cholesterol. You should work to decrease the total amount of fat in your diet and increase the amount of complex carbohydrates (cereal, vegetables). Choose lean cuts of meat, and eat smaller portions of what you choose. Fiber-rich foods will fill you up, and fiber can help lower your cholesterol level. Fruits and vegetables are always important for healthy eating.

Choose more:

- Fish, poultry (skinless), lean beef, pork and lamb
- Skim or low-fat milk
- Sherbet, sorbet, ice milk
- Egg whites
- Steamed vegetables
- Baked potatoes (skip the fatty toppings, though)
- Clear soups
- Unsaturated vegetable oils: corn, canola, safflower, sesame, sunflower, olive, soybean
- Angel food cake
- Graham crackers, animal crackers, fig bars, vanilla wafers, lady fingers
- Pretzels, air-popped popcorn, bagels, English muffins, baked potato chips
- Pancakes or cereal with skim milk
- Fruits, vegetables
- Pasta, rice, whole grain breads

What foods should I avoid or eat less of?

Watch out for saturated fats like butter, coconut oil, palm oil, lard, partially saturated vegetable oil or hydrogenated vegetable oil, and bacon fat. If your triglyceride level is high, avoid alcohol. Avoid fried foods.

Eat less:

- Bacon, sausage and organ meats (such as liver)
- Whole milk
- Ice cream
- Egg yolks
- Buttered or fried vegetables
- French fries
- Creamed soups
- Saturated fats: butter, coconut oil, palm oil, lard, bacon fat, partially saturated vegetable oil or hydrogenated vegetable oil
- Cheesecake
- Pastries, donuts
- Potato chips
- Eggs

Cholesterol-lowering drugs

If diet and exercise don't improve your cholesterol level, your doctor may want to talk about medicine to help. Many different types of medicines can be used to treat high cholesterol, such as bile acid sequestrants (absorbers), fibric acid, HMG-CoA reductase inhibitors and nicotinic acid. Within each group of medicines, there are many different brand names. Your doctor will work with you to find the medicine that works for you.

What else can I do if my cholesterol is high?

If you smoke-quit. If you're overweight-lose weight. And almost everyone needs to exercise more. Talk to your doctor about how to make these changes safely.