

Cholesterol: What Your Level Means

What is cholesterol?

Most of the cholesterol in your body is made by your liver from saturated fat in your diet. Some cholesterol also comes from foods such as eggs, meats and dairy products.

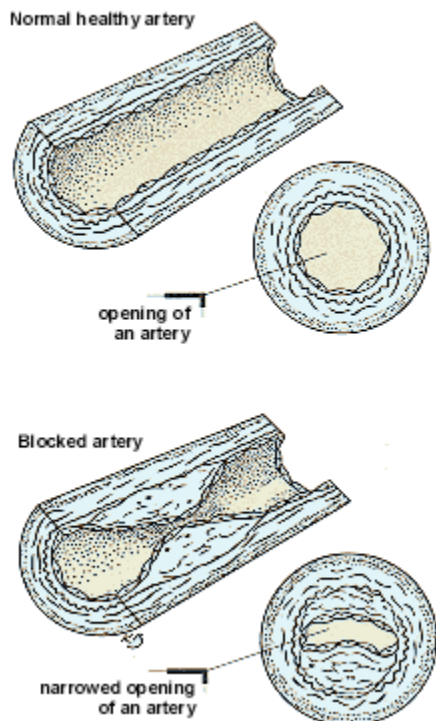
Why is a high cholesterol level unhealthy?

While some cholesterol is needed for good health, too much cholesterol in your blood can raise your risk of having a heart attack or stroke or circulatory problems.

The extra cholesterol in your blood may be stored in your arteries (blood vessels) and cause them to narrow. (This is called atherosclerosis.) Large deposits of cholesterol can completely block an artery, so the blood can't flow through.

If an artery that supplies blood to your heart becomes blocked, a heart attack can occur. If an artery that supplies blood to your brain becomes blocked, a stroke can occur.

Normal artery versus blocked artery



When should I start having my cholesterol level checked?

Men aged 35 and older and women aged 45 and older should have their cholesterol checked periodically. Depending on what your cholesterol level is and what other risk factors for heart disease you have (see the box below), you may need to have it checked more often.

Risk factors for heart disease

- Having already had a heart attack
- Being a man 45 years of age or older
- Having a father or brother who had heart disease before he was 55
- Being a woman who is going through menopause or has completed menopause
- Having a mother or sister who had heart disease before she was 65
- Smoking cigarettes
- Having high blood pressure or diabetes
- Being very overweight
- Being inactive

Are there different types of cholesterol?

Cholesterol travels through the blood in different types of packages, called lipoproteins.

Low-density lipoproteins (LDL) deliver cholesterol to the body. High-density lipoproteins (HDL) remove cholesterol from the bloodstream.

This is why too much LDL cholesterol is bad for the body, while the HDL form is good. It's the balance between the types of cholesterol that tells you what your cholesterol level means (see the box below).

For example, if your total cholesterol level is high because of a high LDL level, you may be at higher risk of heart disease or stroke. If your total level is high only because of a high HDL level, you're probably not at higher risk.

Total cholesterol level

- Less than 200 is best.
 - Between 200 to 239 is borderline high.
 - 240 or more means you're at increased risk for heart disease.
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LDL cholesterol levels: this is the “bad cholesterol.”

- Less than 130 is best for all people.
 - Between 130 to 159 is borderline high; diet and exercise to lower levels is very important.
 - 160 or more means you're at higher risk for heart disease; diet and exercise remain important but levels >160 may signal a need for medication.
 - For patients with diabetes or heart disease, keeping the LDL level below 100 is recommended.
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HDL cholesterol levels: this is the “good cholesterol.”

- Less than 40 means you're at higher risk for heart disease.
- 60 or higher reduces your risk of heart disease.
- Aerobic exercise raise this

Triglycerides cholesterol levels:

- Less than 150 is desirable
- Must be measured after a 10 -12 hour fast

What can I do to improve my cholesterol level?

If you smoke, stop smoking. Lifestyle changes, such as regular aerobic exercise and a healthy balanced diet (low in fat and high in fiber) can also help lower your risk of complications from high cholesterol.

What about medicine to lower cholesterol?

Depending on your risk factors, if healthy eating and exercise don't work after about 6 months to 1 year, you may need medication to lower your cholesterol.

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