

Cholesterol is a natural, fat-like substance coming from the diet and the liver. It is a “building block” necessary by the body to make new cells, manufacture vitamins and produce hormones. However, when there is too much cholesterol it may build up in the bloodstream and lead to heart and blood vessel disease such as a heart attack or stroke. The two most often talked about cholesterols are LDL (low density lipoprotein) and HDL (high density lipoprotein). Most heart disease is related to cholesterol levels (having too little HDL and too much LDL), smoking, a sedentary lifestyle, a diet rich in fat and sugar, and personal risks. You can take simple steps to control your cholesterol and avoid heart disease.

Different Types of “Blood Fats”

LDL cholesterol is the “Lousy” cholesterol. It travels from the liver to all parts of the body. It is the main source of cholesterol buildup and causes narrowing or blockage in the arteries, known as atherosclerosis (hardening of the arteries). This can be especially dangerous if the blockage happens to the brain or heart leading to stroke or heart attack.

HDL cholesterol is the “Healthy” cholesterol and is carried back to the liver. Higher levels of HDL may help clear arteries of excess cholesterol reducing the blockage.

Triglycerides are the form in which most fat is stored in the body. The bodies’ fat cells are mostly transported in the blood in this form as well. Triglycerides can come from fat we eat, or fat which is made in the body from excess calories, carbohydrates (sugar), and alcohol.

Know your Numbers

Blood Test	Recommended
Total Cholesterol	Less than 200 mg/dL
HDL	Men: 40 mg/dL or higher Women: 50 mg/dL or higher
LDL	Less than 100 mg/dL (if you have diabetes or other risk factors check with your provider)
Triglycerides	Less than 150 mg/dL

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 2013.

Risk Factors for High Cholesterol

There are a number of factors that can influence your cholesterol level. There are some factors that you can not change such as heredity, age and gender.

Your genes partly determine how much cholesterol your body produces. As people age, cholesterol levels tend to rise. Before menopause, women have lower levels than men, but after menopause women’s LDL levels rise.

Healthy Lifestyle Recommendations

Lifestyle changes can positively affect abnormal blood cholesterol levels. There are many things you can do to better control your cholesterol, including:

Diet & Nutrition: The Saturated fats & Trans fats (or “hydrogenated”) in the foods you eat can worsen your cholesterol levels. Reducing the amount of these fats and increasing your fruits, vegetables and dietary fiber will help your cholesterol levels. Reading the food labels allows you to make informed healthier food choices.

Weight: Being overweight is a risk factor for heart disease. It also tends to increase your cholesterol levels. Losing weight can help lower your LDL, triglycerides and total cholesterol levels, as well as raising your HDL levels.

Physical Activity: Not being physically active is another risk factor for heart disease. Regular physical activity can help lower LDL and raise HDL levels. It also helps you lose weight, lower blood pressure and reduce the risk of diabetes. You should try to be active (walk, dance, etc.) for at least 30 minutes every day, or 150 minutes weekly.

High Blood Pressure & Diabetes: High blood pressure diabetes and high cholesterol levels all contribute to cardiovascular problems. It is important to keep these conditions under control to avoid stroke or heart disease. This can be done by eating a healthy diet, low in total fat (animal-source), low in salt, moderate in sugar, and rich in fruits, vegetables, legumes and whole grains.

Tobacco: Smoking greatly increases risk of heart disease. If you smoke, try to stop. If you are around second hand smoke, people who smoke, or third hand smoke, clothes or furniture where a smoker was, you need to limit these exposures.

Medication: Sometimes, when blood cholesterol levels cannot be controlled solely through lifestyle strategies then your healthcare provider may discuss medication options. Medication is then added to lifestyle strategies to ensure optimal desirable results.