



## What is Cholesterol?

Cholesterol is a soft, waxy substance found in every cell of your body.<sup>1</sup> It's essential for normal body function, but your body produces all the cholesterol it needs, so cholesterol in your diet is deposited in your blood vessels. Eventually, this surplus can lead to narrowing of the arteries, stroke and heart disease.<sup>2</sup> In fact, high blood cholesterol is a major risk factor for heart disease, the leading cause of death in the U.S. Depending on race, between 40 and 51 percent of American adults have high blood cholesterol.<sup>3</sup>

### LDL vs. HDL cholesterol <sup>4</sup>

Cholesterol is carried through the bloodstream by particles called lipoproteins, which are made up of cholesterol on the inside and protein on the outside. There are two main types of lipoproteins:

**Low-density lipoproteins (LDL)** are the major type of lipoprotein carrying cholesterol through the body. LDL cholesterol builds up on the walls of your arteries and can lead to coronary artery disease, heart attack and stroke.

**High-density lipoproteins (HDL)** carry excess cholesterol back to the liver to remove it from the body. HDL cholesterol is what's referred to as "good cholesterol."

## Silent danger

High cholesterol has no symptoms – only a blood test will tell you if you have a problem. However, there are several behavioral and genetic risk factors, including:<sup>4</sup>

- **Diet.** A diet high in saturated fat and trans fatty acids or trans fats, which are primarily found in animal fat and hydrogenated vegetable oil, will raise your cholesterol level. Foods from animal sources, such as egg yolks, meat and dairy products, also add unnecessary dietary cholesterol.
- **Physical activity.** If you don't get regular physical activity, the resulting weight gain can raise your LDL cholesterol level.
- **Weight.** Being overweight tends to increase LDL cholesterol levels and decrease HDL cholesterol levels.
- **Heredity.** A genetic condition called familial hypercholesterolemia results in very high LDL cholesterol levels.
- **Age and gender.** LDL cholesterol levels rise as people age, and men tend to have lower levels of the "good" HDL cholesterol than women. Women generally have lower LDL cholesterol levels than men until about age 55, but then their LDL levels tend to be higher.

## What you can do

Everyone can take steps to lower their cholesterol. First, ask your doctor to check your blood cholesterol levels. The National Cholesterol Education Program recommends that healthy adults have their cholesterol levels checked every five years.<sup>4</sup> Have your blood tested as early as possible to establish baseline levels.<sup>2</sup> Check the sidebar for guidelines on what these levels mean.

Regardless of what your test results show, keep your cholesterol levels healthy by eating a balanced diet, losing any excess weight, making time for regular physical activity and avoiding tobacco. If your doctor finds that you have high blood cholesterol, he or she may prescribe medications in addition to recommending lifestyle changes, including the following:<sup>2</sup>

### Lose any extra weight.

Even five or 10 pounds can make a difference in your cholesterol levels.

### Eat heart-healthy foods.

Researchers say a fiber-rich diet can help as much as medicine to lower cholesterol for some people. Choose whole grains, lean meats, fish, skim milk, and fresh fruits and vegetables. Aim for less than 300 milligrams (mg) of cholesterol in your daily diet.

### Exercise regularly.

As long as your doctor gives you the okay, try to work in up to an hour of exercise each day. Regular exercise can improve your cholesterol levels.

### Quit smoking.

Quitting smoking can improve your HDL ("good") cholesterol level.

## Optimal cholesterol levels for adults<sup>5</sup>

Cholesterol levels are measured in milligrams (mg) of cholesterol per deciliter (dL) of blood.

**Total cholesterol:**  
less than 200 mg/dL

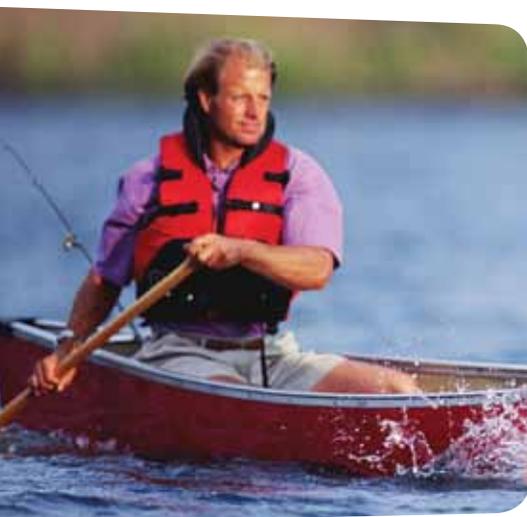
**LDL cholesterol ("bad" cholesterol):**  
less than 100 mg/dL

**HDL cholesterol ("good" cholesterol):**  
60 mg/dL or higher

**Triglycerides**  
(another kind of fat found in the blood):  
less than 150 mg/dL

## Resources

Visit the American Heart Association online at [americanheart.org](http://americanheart.org). In the "Cholesterol" section, you'll find tracking tools, questions to ask your doctor and information about cholesterol-lowering medicines.



Visit [anthem.com](http://anthem.com) for more ways to get healthy – and stay healthy.

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Sources: <sup>1</sup> American Heart Association, *Cholesterol* (2009): [americanheart.org](http://americanheart.org). <sup>2</sup> MayoClinic.com, *High Blood Cholesterol* (August 6, 2008). <sup>3</sup> American Heart Association, *Cholesterol Statistics* (2009): [americanheart.org](http://americanheart.org). <sup>4</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Cholesterol* (Accessed November 8, 2007): [cdc.gov](http://cdc.gov). <sup>5</sup> American Heart Association, *Cholesterol Levels* (2009): [americanheart.org](http://americanheart.org)

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