

Living healthy and lowering your cholesterol

What is Cholesterol?

Simply stated, cholesterol is one of two major fats found in your blood. The other fat is called triglyceride. Fats are an important part of your diet and serve many purposes.

Where does cholesterol come from?

Cholesterol mainly gets into your blood through the foods you eat. Foods that have high levels of cholesterol, or fat, mostly come from animal fats. Examples of some of these foods are red meats, milk, cheese, ice cream, some cooking oils, butter, shellfish and egg yolks.

How does my body use cholesterol?

Fats are a major source of “fuel” or energy for your body. They insulate your body from cold. Fats are also an important part of your cells. Fats may be stored in your cells for future use.

There are “good” and “bad” fats, or cholesterol. Let’s briefly explain the difference. First, cholesterol flows through your blood and attaches itself to proteins also found in your blood. When the cholesterol and the proteins combine they are called lipoproteins. Like fats by themselves, these lipoproteins serve several purposes in your body. One important purpose is to carry the cholesterol through the blood stream to where it can leave the body. In medical terms, the “good” cholesterol is called High Density Lipoprotein cholesterol, or simply HDL cholesterol. It is good because it helps take fat from the body, and is made up of more protein than fat.

The “bad” cholesterol is called Low Density Lipoprotein cholesterol, or LDL cholesterol. It is considered bad cholesterol because it is made up of more fat than protein.

Some times there is too much fat flowing through the blood. This can increase the level of cholesterol in your blood. High cholesterol levels can increase your risk of having heart disease, a heart attack, or stroke because the fat clings to vessel walls and clogs the flow of blood.

How I know if my cholesterol is too high?

You probably will not know if your cholesterol is too high. That is why it is important to have a routine physical examination and blood tests to make sure your cholesterol is in a normal range. You can have a good idea, however, if you are at high risk of high cholesterol by looking at yourself and your lifestyle. Generally, you are at a greater risk of having a high cholesterol level if:

- You are over weight.
- You are inactive.
- You smoke.
- You eat foods that contain high amounts of animal fats.

Your doctor can order a blood test to determine the amount of cholesterol in your blood. It is a simple test that is done in your doctor’s office. Your doctor can tell you what your total cholesterol level is, and can also tell you how much good and bad cholesterol is in your blood.

After your blood has been tested, the laboratory will send a report to your doctor. Below are the categories of cholesterol levels:

LDL or “Bad” cholesterol

If you result is:	Then your bad cholesterol is:
<100	Considered to be “normal”
100 to 129	Considered to be “near normal”
130 to 159	Considered to be “somewhat high”
160 to 189	Considered to be “high”
>190	Considered to be “very high”

What if my cholesterol is too high?

There are several ways to reduce your total cholesterol level, lower your bad cholesterol and raise your good cholesterol. The good news is: it is in your hands! If you are overweight, eat foods high in fat and do not exercise, the lifestyle changes recommended below will make a difference. Remember, you don’t have to make all the changes at the same time and every small change you make reduces your risk for heart disease. The best way to approach lifestyle changes is to take one step at a time.

Eat well and lose weight

Where do you begin? Let’s start with food. Americans consume high amounts of fats. Remember, you don’t have to change your entire eating style overnight. The most important thing to remember is to make a small change, incorporate this change into your life and then make another change to your eating habits. These changes are not temporary “diet” changes, but should be approached as life-long lifestyle changes.

Below are the recommended servings from the five food groups. To begin, make a small adjustment to your eating style by choosing an item from below and incorporating that into your meals. For example, if you consume more eggs than you should, decrease the number of eggs you eat to the recommended level. Try this for a couple of weeks. Then, rather than always eating red meat, you might begin substituting poultry or fish twice a week.

Begin each day with breakfast. Breakfast is the “breaking the fast” from a night without food. Your body needs the fuel that food provides. It is very important to eat a good breakfast. Remember, simple changes add up. You will soon be proud of what you have accomplished and how much “in control” you will feel.

- Three to five servings per day of fresh, frozen or canned vegetables with out added fat, sauce, or salt.
- Two to four servings per day of fresh, frozen or canned fruits.
- Two to three servings (or about 5 ounces per day) of lean meat, skinless poultry or seafood (one serving is about the same size of a deck of cards).
- Two to three servings per day of skim or low-fat milk and low-fat or fat free dairy products, such as cheeses and yogurt.
- No more than two egg yolks per week – you can switch to egg whites or egg substitutes.
- Six servings of whole grain breads, cereals, pasta, beans, low-fat crackers, or starchy vegetables.

Eat fats, oils, and sweets sparingly. Olive oil, cashews, peanuts and almonds are good for you, but only in small amounts. Use soft or liquid margarines, and look for one that contains plant sterols/stanols. Choose spreads or salad dressings made from vegetable oil that are low-fat or fat free.

Eat more fiber. Fruit is an easy addition –take a banana, an apple and an orange to work for snacks. Cook a pot of refried beans in the crock pot and enjoy a burrito when you get home. The following foods are rich in fiber:

- Cereal grains (barley, oatmeal, oat bran, seeds).
- Fruit (apples, bananas, blackberry, citrus fruits, nectarines, peaches, pears, plums, prunes).
- Legumes (all types of beans, lentils, chick peas, black-eyed peas).
- Vegetables (broccoli, brussel sprouts, carrots) – an easy reminder is “green is good”.
- Fish once or twice per week that is rich in omega-3 fatty acids (like salmon)-remember shellfish are high in fat.

Alcohol has been mentioned as being beneficial for your heart. A small amount of alcohol, such as one glass of wine per day, may be beneficial, but more than this may also have the opposite effect. It is always better to seek your doctor’s advice before choosing alcohol as a means to lowering your cholesterol level.

If you do not currently exercise at all, research shows that **even a small amount of exercise** can do wonders for your health. Regular exercise is truly a miracle treatment! Regular exercise decreases the bad cholesterol and increases the good cholesterol, lowers triglycerides, and lowers blood pressure and body weight. Like changing your eating habits, you don’t have to make the change all at once. Start slow. The important thing to remember is to continue on a regular basis.

Remember to check with your doctor before starting an exercise program especially if you have had previous heart or blood problems, or are taking any medicines. Once you have your doctor’s approval to exercise, begin by simply walking. Walking is considered one of the best exercises. Begin walking 15 or 20 minutes per day. Increase by 5 minutes every other week. You should try to work up a schedule of walking a minimum of 30 minutes no fewer than three days a week. A target schedule may be 30 minutes five days a week. Check with your doctor about the best walking schedule for you.

With busy schedules, it is sometimes difficult to find time to exercise. Other ways to work physical activity into your daily life include:

- Take stairs instead of an escalator or elevator whenever you can.
- Park your car a few blocks from work and walk the rest of the way.
- Mow the lawn with a push mower.
- Rake leaves or garden.
- Exercise on a stationary machine or do calisthenics while watching TV.
- Play actively with your family: basketball, bike, swim, or ski.
- Take a dance class.
- Walk the golf course rather than ride in a cart.

Smoking

Without question, smoking increases the risk of heart disease and negatively affects your cholesterol. The best thing you can do is to stop smoking immediately. Your doctor can suggest ways to help quit this habit.

What if I Need Medicine for My High Cholesterol?

Sometimes you may need medicines to help keep your cholesterol in control. If you need medicine to control your cholesterol level, your doctor will discuss the options with you. These medicines are proven effective in reducing your risk of heart disease.

Formula:

Lose weight + eat well + lower cholesterol + exercise + stop smoking = a healthy heart.