

Cholesterol and Heart Disease: What You Should Know

facts

What you should know about cholesterol

High cholesterol is a major risk factor for coronary heart disease (CHD), and more American men and women die of CHD than any other condition, including cancer. Additionally, people with heart disease and high cholesterol are at increased risk of suffering a stroke — the third leading cause of death in the United States and the leading cause of long-term disability.

The good news is research shows that lowering your cholesterol reduces the chance of having a heart attack, needing bypass surgery or angioplasty, and dying of CHD-related causes. You can survive high cholesterol by taking action now to lower it. Your weapons are diet, exercise, and if necessary, medication.

What is cholesterol?

Cholesterol is a white, waxy, fat-like substance that's found in everyone's body, to varying degrees. We need cholesterol to survive, but too much of the wrong kind can cause problems.

You may have heard about "bad" vs "good" cholesterol. Low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol is considered bad because it can build up inside your arteries. High-density lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol is considered good because it helps clear away the bad cholesterol.

What are the symptoms of high cholesterol?

There are no symptoms. The only way to know you have high cholesterol is to go to your doctor for a cholesterol test.

How does high LDL cholesterol contribute to heart disease?

When too much LDL cholesterol builds up on the inside of your arteries (blood vessels that carry oxygen-rich blood from the heart to other parts of the body), it forms a substance called plaque. Perhaps you've heard of the term "hardening of the arteries." The technical name for this is atherosclerosis, which means simply that the buildup of plaque in the arteries causes them to become thicker, harder, and less flexible — in short, less efficient at carrying blood.

- ◆ When blood flow is severely blocked (or stopped completely), a heart attack can result.
- ◆ When blood flow to the heart is restricted, angina (chest pain) can result.
- ◆ When blood flow to the brain is severely blocked (or stopped completely), a stroke can result.



What are the risk factors for heart disease?

- ◆ Low HDL cholesterol (less than 40 mg/dL). High HDL cholesterol (60 mg/dL or higher) decreases your chances of developing heart disease.
- ◆ Smoking
- ◆ High blood pressure (treated or untreated)
- ◆ Heredity (a father, brother, or son who had heart disease before age 55, or a mother, sister, or daughter with heart disease before age 65)
- ◆ Age (45 or older for men; 55 or older for women)



As you can see, this list includes things you can't change — like family history. But it also includes things you can change — like smoking, high levels of “bad” or LDL cholesterol, and low levels of “good” or HDL cholesterol.

Be sure to discuss any risk factors with your doctor so that you can take appropriate action.

What should my cholesterol level be?

These are the treatment goals recommended by the National Cholesterol Education Program (NCEP):

If you have:	Your LDL cholesterol goal is:
Definite heart disease, diabetes, or other atherosclerotic disease,* or your 10-year risk of heart disease [†] is greater than 20%	Less than 100 [‡]
No heart disease but 2 or more risk factors other than high LDL cholesterol and your 10-year risk of heart disease [†] is 20% or less	Less than 130 [‡]
No heart disease and fewer than 2 risk factors other than high LDL cholesterol	Less than 160 [‡]

Based on the National Cholesterol Education Program (NCEP) Third Report of the Expert Panel on Detection, Evaluation, and Treatment of High Blood Cholesterol in Adults, May 2001.

* Other atherosclerotic disease may include carotid (neck) artery disease, peripheral (arms and legs) arterial disease, and abdominal aortic aneurysm.

[†] The probability of having a heart attack in 10 years. (See your doctor.)

[‡] Your doctor may consider medication if your LDL cholesterol is above your goal and if diet and other lifestyle changes alone have not lowered your cholesterol to your goal.

Your doctor or healthcare professional can give you a more detailed explanation — and personal recommendation — about what your cholesterol numbers should be. But the most important thing to do at this point is to take action. In the next section, we'll talk about ways you can do just that.

health tips

Can lifestyle changes help me reach my cholesterol goal?

There are three main ways to fight high cholesterol: diet, exercise, and, when appropriate, medication. Remember to discuss with your doctor all treatment options available to you.

Diet

If you've already been diagnosed with high cholesterol, chances are your doctor has recommended a diet low in fat and cholesterol. This is important, because food is a major source of excess fat and cholesterol in your body.

As part of a cholesterol-lowering diet, the American Heart Association recommends no more than 6 ounces of cooked lean meat, poultry, or fish a day. The AHA also recommends keeping total fat to less than 30% of your calories, and limiting saturated fats (butter, shortening, and stick margarine) to less than 10%.

Exercise

Being more physically active is an important way to keep your heart healthy. Exercise not only helps decrease LDL cholesterol, it increases HDL cholesterol. The combination of diet and exercise also helps control your weight, an extra benefit for people with heart disease or risk factors such as high blood pressure or diabetes.

To determine whether diet and exercise alone can effectively lower cholesterol, doctors usually monitor patients on a diet low in fat and cholesterol.



What if diet and exercise aren't enough?

Medication

Some people, because of body chemistry or heredity, have too much LDL cholesterol. Even the strictest diet and exercise program won't lower their cholesterol into the desirable range.

If diet and exercise alone aren't effective, your doctor may prescribe a medication that impacts your cholesterol levels as part of your overall treatment plan. Be sure to tell your doctor about any medicines you are currently taking, and if you change medications. There are several medications available that can help control your cholesterol. Your doctor can decide what is the best medication for you.

Once you're on the medication, take it only as your doctor recommends. And don't stop taking your medication without talking with your doctor.

How do I know my cholesterol is under control?

The only way to manage your cholesterol is to know your goals and track your progress. Talk with your doctor about your target cholesterol level and how you can achieve your goals over time. Make sure to have your cholesterol tested regularly based on your doctor's recommendation. If you are diagnosed with diabetes or acute cardiovascular illness, you should be tested at least once a year.

Do not assume that just because you have started taking a medication your cholesterol is under control. A recent study showed only 38 percent of patients taking cholesterol-lowering medications are reaching LDL ("bad" cholesterol) goals as defined by National Cholesterol Education Program (NCEP) guidelines. Your physician may need to make adjustments to your medication.

What else can I do to lower my LDL cholesterol?

- ◆ **Read the labels on prepared foods.** Look for words such as “fat free,” “low fat,” and “cholesterol free.” The amount of total fat and saturated fat in each serving is listed. Use this to plan healthy meals and snacks that won’t increase your cholesterol.
- ◆ **Switch from saturated fats to unsaturated fats** — especially monounsaturated fats. Saturated fats are usually found in foods that come from animals (meat, butter, and milk). “Tropical” vegetable oils (palm and coconut) and hydrogenated oils (solid margarine and shortening) also contain saturated fat. Unsaturated fats can be either monounsaturated or polyunsaturated, and usually come from vegetables. They include olive, canola, corn, and safflower oils. Monounsaturated fats, the better choice, include olive and canola oils.
- ◆ **Try to walk as often as possible** instead of driving or using public transportation.
- ◆ **Use the stairs** instead of taking the elevator or escalator.
- ◆ **Do household chores** such as vacuuming, lawn mowing, and gardening to increase your activity level.

If you have been prescribed medication, remember that diet, exercise, and medication all work together to lower LDL cholesterol. The closer you stick to your plan, the easier it will be to reach your goal and maintain it.

Where can I find more information?

American Heart Association

Phone: (800) AHA-USA1 (800-242-8721)

www.amhrt.org

American Dietetic Association

www.eatright.org



Bristol Park Medical Group
www.bristolparkmed.com

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