

Tips for Managing Your Cholesterol

Cholesterol has a major impact on one's risk for heart disease, the number one killer of both men and women in the U.S. Heredity, exercise, and diet determine your cholesterol levels. Anyone with high cholesterol is at an increased risk for heart disease, and people with diabetes are especially prone to heart problems, even if their cholesterol is only slightly elevated.

Types of Cholesterol

Cholesterol is a substance that you need for many functions in the body, including involvement in forming cell walls, building hormones, and digesting fats. There are different types of cholesterol, which differ in their effects on your body and health.

- **Total Cholesterol** is a test of all of the cholesterol in the blood that can be measured. It is the most common cholesterol test. Total cholesterol includes **HDL** cholesterol, **LDL** cholesterol, and several other kinds of cholesterol found in the blood.
 - **Ideal total cholesterol:** below 200. From 200 to 239 is considered borderline high, and over 240 is associated with the highest risk of heart disease.

For the most accurate results, be sure to fast at least 10 hours before getting an LDL/HDL cholesterol blood test.

- **HDL Cholesterol** is *healthy* cholesterol (Think “H” for “Healthy or “High”). HDL cholesterol helps protect your heart and blood vessels by sweeping out the fats that could block the smooth flow of blood through your body. Therefore, higher levels of this cholesterol can lower the risk of heart disease.
 - **Ideal HDL level:** 60 or above. While HDL levels between 40 and 60 are acceptable; below 40 is considered a major risk factor for heart disease.
- **LDL Cholesterol** is *unhealthy* cholesterol (Think “L” for “Lousy/Low”). A high amount of LDL cholesterol in the bloodstream can cause the arteries to develop a fatty build up that can damage the artery walls. This is the most common cause of heart disease.
 - **Ideal LDL level:** less than 100. LDL levels between 100 to 129 are acceptable in people without any other heart disease risks. An LDL level between 130 and 159 is borderline high, and 160 or higher is considered a major risk factor for heart disease. Patients with diabetes or heart disease should aim for LDL below 100.
- **Triglycerides** are another type of fat found in your blood. It is usually included as part of the blood test you take for cholesterol. Triglycerides are a major source of energy and the most common type of fat in your body. In normal amounts, triglycerides are important for overall good health. High levels of triglycerides also put you at greater risk for heart disease. Normal triglyceride levels are below 150. High levels are 200 or above.

What Can You Do to Manage or Improve Your Cholesterol?

Making lifestyle changes can help you lower your total cholesterol and minimize the risk of heart disease in the future. Start small and make gradual changes to get lasting results. See the next page for tips on nutrition, physical activity, and medications to help you improve your heart health.

Making Lifestyle Changes to Make A Difference

- **Modify Your Eating Habits.** Eating a heart-healthy diet may seem like a big challenge, especially if it seems that all of the foods you consider really delicious are not included. However, using a few easy guidelines can make it easier on you and your heart. Remember the following tips when choosing foods to buy, cook, and eat.
- **Tips for Choosing Heart-Healthy Foods**
 - Aim to eat **more**:
 - Foods lower in saturated fats and cholesterol.
 - Fish, especially those high in Omega-3 fatty acids (salmon, tuna, sardines) which help raise your healthy (HDL) cholesterol.
 - Foods higher in fiber. These give you a “full” feeling and offer other health benefits and help you keep your energy level balanced throughout the day.
 - Vegetables, fruits, and beans/legumes (split peas, soy beans) which also provide essential vitamins, minerals and other healthy nutrients
 - Whole-grain products like oats, barley, brown rice, bran, and whole-wheat
 - Avoid fruit juices, jams/fruit spreads, and other processed fruits which have little or no fiber and have more concentrated sugars that are quickly used up by your body and can lead to lower energy.
 - Aim to eat **fewer** or **avoid**:
 - High-fat foods from animals (meats, eggs, high-fat dairy products).
 - If you like dairy products, switch to nonfat or low fat dairy products (gradually make changes – i.e. 2% milk to 1% for awhile, then nonfat).
 - Saturated or “trans” fats, which increase cholesterol and triglycerides (especially foods made with butter, lard or oils such as palm or coconut).
 - Try adding a vegetable-based spread, such as Smart Balance, instead of butter, margarine or cream cheese. These products can actually lower your cholesterol when eaten daily.
 - When cooking, use mono-unsaturated fats (olive or canola) rather than animal fats like lard and butter. Avoid any fats that are firm at room temperature.
 - When eating out, order smaller portions or share your main course. Include more vegetables and/or a salad (with low-fat or small amounts of dressing). A baked potato can be a healthy addition if you avoid the butter, sour cream and bacon bits (try seasoning it with a little salt and/or pepper instead).
- **Be More Physically Active.** Physical activity can have a positive effect on cholesterol. Research has shown that physical activity raises healthy (HDL) cholesterol and lowers unhealthy (LDL) cholesterol. Exercise is a good way to lower your risk of heart disease, decrease blood pressure, and reduce stress.
 - Aim for some type of physical activity for **30 minutes on most days**. If it is too difficult to do 30 minutes at one time, try breaking the 30 minutes into 10 minute activities done 3 times per day for the same health benefits.
 - **Choose an activity you enjoy**; It's more likely you will be able to stick to it. Walking, dancing, gardening, and yoga (or other gentle forms of stretching and movement) are good for maintaining heart health, flexibility and stability/balance. Find a buddy to share your activity and help you stay motivated.

- **Lose Weight If Necessary.** Being over your ideal weight can increase your cholesterol. The diet and exercise tips above can help you achieve a healthy weight. Losing even just a little weight can bring cholesterol down to healthier levels.
 - **Reduce the fat on your “middle.”** Research has shown that people with extra weight in the stomach, as opposed to those with extra weight in the hips and thighs, are at higher risk for heart disease.
 - **Gradual weight loss is easier to maintain for life.** Instead of setting unrealistically high weight loss goals start focusing on a few pounds per month.
- **Medication.** Many types of medications and supplements can help lower cholesterol.
 - **Niacin (a vitamin)** is very effective in increasing HDL (healthy) cholesterol. Although it can be purchased without a prescription, using it successfully requires guidance from your physician. Niacin can cause “flushing” (increased sensation of body heat) for some people, so ask your doctor for recommendations on how to avoid this. Prescription-strength niacin is another option that is better tolerated by many people.
 - **Statins** are a group of drugs proven effective in lowering unhealthy (LDL) cholesterol levels, especially for those who have difficulty lowering their cholesterol through dietary changes and exercise. Your doctor can help you decide if these drugs might be helpful for your situation.

Resources

Learn more online at www.HillPhysicians.com/YourHealth.

You may also find useful information through:

National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute: www.nhlbi.nih.gov

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