

What Is Cholesterol?

Cholesterol is a fatty substance found in cell walls in the body, and is used to make vitamin D, bile acids, hormones, and other substances. Because blood and cholesterol do not mix, your body uses two types of lipoproteins to carry cholesterol in the blood, HDL and LDL. High density lipoprotein (HDL) is referred to as good cholesterol because it carries cholesterol away from tissues to the liver, where it leaves the body. Low density lipoprotein (LDL) is referred to as bad cholesterol because it carries cholesterol to tissues, including arteries. High levels of LDL increase the risk of heart disease. Too much cholesterol in the blood can result in cholesterol build up in arteries, which can make them narrow and less flexible, increasing the chance of blockage and other problems.

Treating High LDL Cholesterol

High LDL can be treated with medication, but cholesterol levels can also be lowered by one's diet, physical activity, and weight management.

Food Choices

Foods play an important role in blood cholesterol levels, therefore healthy eating is a key factor in treating high LDL cholesterol.

- Saturated Fat -- Saturated fat is responsible more than anything else in one's diet for raising cholesterol. Less than 7% of one's daily calories should come from saturated fat.
- Trans Fat -- Trans fat is often found in foods that have been hydrogenated, such as margarine, cookies, doughnuts, breads, and fried foods, and can raise blood cholesterol.
- Total Fat -- Total fat measures the overall amount of fat in foods. Although not all fats raise cholesterol, it is still important to monitor how much fat your body intakes. About 25-35% of your daily calories can come from total fat.
- Cholesterol -- Dietary cholesterol is found only in animal products, such as meat, egg yolks, and dairy products. Dietary cholesterol intake should be less than 200 milligrams daily.
- Soluble Fiber -- Soluble fiber can help block cholesterol and fats from being absorbed in the wall of the intestines into the blood stream. Increasing fiber intake by 5-10 grams per day has shown to decrease cholesterol by about 5%.
- Plant Stanols and Sterols -- Plant stanols and sterols (used in food products from soybean and pine-tree oils) are added to some margarines, and a daily intake of about 2 grams can reduce LDL cholesterol by about 5-15 percent.
- Other Factors -- Omega-3 fatty acids (found in some fish and in some plant sources, such as walnuts, soybean oils, and flaxseed) reduce the risk of heart disease. Reducing sodium can decrease blood pressure, and decreasing alcohol consumption will also prevent health problems that are often caused by too much drinking.

Physical Activity

A major risk factor of heart disease is lack of physical activity. Regular physical activity has many benefits; it can help manage weight, which in turn lowers LDL cholesterol; it can raise HDL and lower triglycerides (a type of fat that increases the chance of heart disease). Physical activity can also improve the fitness of the heart and lungs, and can lower your blood pressure.

You should get at least 30 minutes of physical activity on most/all days of the week. Some moderate activities include walking at a brisk pace, bicycling, gardening, and house cleaning, while more intense activities include jogging, swimming, aerobics, and basketball. If you are not currently physically active, you should begin slowly and gradually increase your intensity.

Weight Management

The probability of having high triglyceride levels, a low HDL, and a high LDL is increased by being overweight or obese. Being overweight or obese can also lead to high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease, and other health problems. Losing weight reduces the risks of these occurring and can improve your cholesterol and triglyceride levels. Consult with your doctor to find what a healthy weight is for you. Weight should be lost gradually; a good pace is 1 to 2 pounds per week. Even if you do not reach your ideal weight, some weight loss will still lower the risk of heart disease and other health problems.

To lose weight, you need to take in fewer calories than you burn; one pound a week can be lost by eating 500 fewer calories daily than you use up. Here are some helpful tips that will contribute to weight loss:

- Do not skip meals; this makes you hungrier and more likely to overeat.
- Drink at least 8 cups of water or other non caloric beverages daily.
- Use smaller plates; your servings will appear larger.