

Patient Education

General Internal Medicine Clinic



Cholesterol

General information about cholesterol test results and tips on diet and exercise

Cholesterol levels in your blood are one tool that is being used by your healthcare provider to determine your risk for heart disease and stroke. Treatment of high cholesterol may lessen your risks. There are some things you can do to help lower your cholesterol and decrease your risk of heart disease and stroke.

What is cholesterol?

Cholesterol is a white, waxy fat found naturally in your body. It is used to build cell walls and make certain hormones. Although it is important to have some levels of cholesterol in your blood for proper body functions, too much can cause problems.

If excess cholesterol is in your blood, it can cause layers to build up on the walls inside of your blood vessels. This thickening of blood vessel walls can eventually lead to a decrease in the blood flow causing heart attacks or strokes.

What does a cholesterol test tell me?

Depending on your healthcare needs or health history, your provider may first check your *total cholesterol* level. This is checked every 5 years or in some cases more often. The following chart can provide a guideline on how to interpret your total cholesterol results.

Total Cholesterol Level	Potential Risk Category
200 or below	Low
200-239	Borderline High
240 or above	High

What if my total cholesterol is high?

If your *total cholesterol* level is “high,” your healthcare provider may then check what type of cholesterol makes up the total amount. There are two types of cholesterol carriers that are presently measured – *low-density lipids* (LDL) and *high-density lipids* (HDL).

LDLs and HDLs carry cholesterol in your blood. LDLs leave behind fatty deposits on your blood vessel walls and contribute to the risk of heart disease and stroke. HDLs clean up and remove extra cholesterol from the body and therefore decrease the risk of heart disease and stroke.

So, it is better to have low levels of LDLs “bad cholesterol” and high levels of HDLs “good cholesterol” in your blood. The charts below can provide a guideline on how to interpret your HDL and LDL results.

HDL Level	Potential Risk Category
Above 60	Low
Less than 35	High

LDL Level	Potential Risk Category
130 or below	Low
130-159	Borderline High*
160 or above	High*

* Other risk factors for heart disease and stroke are hypertension, smoking, a family history of heart disease, gender (male), diabetes, and obesity. If your LDL level places you in the borderline high or high category, your health care provider may choose to place you on medication to assist in lowering your cholesterol levels to minimize your risk for disease.

What can I do to help lower my cholesterol?

There are 3 things you can do to help to decrease your “bad cholesterol” (LDL) and increase your “good cholesterol” (HDL).

- 1. Exercise:** Exercise goes hand-in-hand with good nutrition for controlling cholesterol. Exercise not only helps you keep your weight down and strengthens your heart muscle, but can also increase your “good cholesterol.”
 - Do aerobic exercise 20 to 30 minutes every other day. Aerobic exercise is any activity that keeps your heart at a rate of at least 20% above your heart’s resting rate. Examples of activities that can help you get to an aerobic state are brisk walking, swimming, dancing, skating, running, bicycling.
 - Check with your health care provider if you have questions about what types of activities would be best for you.
 - Start your exercise program slowly.
- 2. Diet:** Research has shown that foods containing fats and cholesterol can affect your blood lipid levels. It is recommended that you reduce the amount of fats and cholesterol that you eat everyday and that the total fat calories you eat not be more than 30% of your total calories for that day.

General Diet Tips

- Avoid foods high in *saturated fats*. Saturated fats are mainly of animal origin (whole milk, cream, butter, cheese, eggs, meat), but some vegetable oils also contain saturated fats (coconut oil, palm oil, chocolate, many solid cooking fats).
- Substitute *saturated fats* with *polyunsaturated* (margarine, corn oil, sunflower seed oil, cotton seed oil safflower oil, sesame oil, soybean oil) or *monounsaturated fats* (olive oil, rapeseed oil, peanut oil, sesame oil).
- Avoid *hydrogenated* oils (margarine, cooking fats, many processed foods).
- Avoid food high in cholesterol. Cholesterol is found ONLY in foods from animals (meat, eggs yolks, organ meats, dairy products).
- Be aware that low-fat does not mean low-cholesterol and low-cholesterol does not mean low fat; read the label.
- Select meat with the least amount of marbling and visible fat and trim visible fat from meat before cooking.

Knowing your total cholesterol can sometimes be enough. However, if your total cholesterol is “high” your health care provider may choose to also look at what makes up that total cholesterol level. This means they will probably check the levels of your “good cholesterol” (HDL) and “bad cholesterol” (LDL).

Questions?

Your questions are important. Call your clinic or healthcare provider if you have questions or concerns.

Call: _____

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- Buy the leanest ground meat available and pour off the fat after browning.
- Remove the skin from poultry before cooking.
- Drink skimmed milk.
- Broil, bake, or boil instead of frying.
- Skim fat off meat juices before adding to stews, soups or gravy.
- Check food labels for fat and cholesterol content.
- Eat fruits, vegetables, beans, and whole grains.
- Include “soluble fibers” in your diet (oatmeal, oat bran, dry peas, dry beans).
- Use low-fat yogurt, and cottage cheese instead of sour cream or other cream substitutes.
- Use egg whites alone instead of whole eggs.
- Use sunflower, safflower, soybean, canola, olive, sesame, corn, or peanut oils instead of tropical oils such as palm or coconut.
- Snack on rice cakes, dry-popped popcorn, or pretzels instead of candy, nuts, and chips.
- Using soy products may be beneficial.

3. **Medicine:** Take your medication and follow through with the care plan that you and your health care provider decided was best for you.

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