## What is Cholesterol?

**Guide to Cholesterol:**

Cholesterol is a waxy substance your body uses to protect nerves, make cell tissues and produce certain hormones. Your liver makes all the cholesterol your body needs. Your body also gets cholesterol directly from the food you eat (such as eggs, meats and dairy products). Too much cholesterol can be bad for your health.

## What is the difference between “bad” cholesterol and “good” cholesterol?

“Bad” cholesterol is also called Low-density lipoprotein (LDL). It delivers cholesterol to the body and can cause plaque to build up in arteries (atherosclerosis). If you have high levels of “bad” cholesterol, you may have a higher risk of developing heart disease or stroke. “Good” cholesterol is also called High-density lipoprotein (HDL). It removes cholesterol from the bloodstream.

Triglycerides are another type of fat in your blood. When you eat more calories than your body can use, it turns the extra calories into triglycerides. If you have high levels of triglycerides, you may also have a higher risk of developing heart disease or stroke.

**What should my cholesterol levels be?\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

HDL cholesterol levels

* Less than 40 means you're at higher risk for heart disease.
* 60 or higher greatly reduces your risk of heart disease.

Total cholesterol level

* Less than 200 is best.
* 200 to 239 is borderline high.
* 240 or more means you're at increased risk for heart disease.

Triglycerides

* Less than 150 mg/dL is best

LDL cholesterol levels

* Below 100 is ideal for people who have a higher risk of heart disease.
* 100 to 129 is near optimal.
* 130 to 159 is borderline high.
* 160 or more means you're at a higher risk for heart disease.

**When should I start having my cholesterol level checked? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

You can’t tell if you have high cholesterol without having it checked. A blood test known as a lipid panel is usually the way cholesterol is checked.

Men 35 years of age and older should have their cholesterol checked. Men and women 20 years of age and older who have high cholesterol or other [risk factors for heart disease](http://familydoctor.org/familydoctor/en/diseases-conditions/coronary-artery-disease/causes-risk-factors.html) should also have their cholesterol checked. Ask your doctor how often you should have your cholesterol checked.

## What can I do to improve my cholesterol level?\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

If you have high cholesterol, it may be necessary for you to make some changes in your life. If you smoke, quit. Exercise regularly. If you're overweight, losing just 5 to 10 pounds can help reduce your cholesterol levels. Make sure to eat plenty of fruits, vegetables, whole grains and fish. Avoid saturated and trans fats, which can raise cholesterol levels. Also limit your overall cholesterol intake to less than 300 milligrams per day and 200 milligrams if you have heart disease.

Depending on your risk factors, if healthy eating and exercise don't work to lower your cholesterol level, your doctor may suggest medication to reduce your cholesterol level.