



# Do you know your numbers?



## Manage your cholesterol levels to stay healthy

Whether you're in great health — or still getting there — your cholesterol levels are important to know. High blood cholesterol puts you at risk for heart disease.<sup>1</sup> About a third of American adults have high blood cholesterol.<sup>2</sup> Are you one of them?

### What is cholesterol?

Cholesterol is a type of fat. It is found in every cell of your body, and your body can't function without it.<sup>3</sup> But your body makes all the cholesterol it needs, so the cholesterol from the food you eat is deposited in your blood vessels. Eventually, your blood vessels can get clogged, leading to stroke, heart disease and even death.<sup>2</sup>

Your body uses cholesterol to build cells, make hormones like estrogen, testosterone and adrenaline, and to help your metabolism work efficiently. Cholesterol also helps your body digest fat and absorb nutrients from the food you eat.<sup>4</sup>

Lipoproteins carry cholesterol through your bloodstream. There are two main types of lipoproteins:<sup>4</sup>

- **Low-density lipoproteins (LDL)** carry the most cholesterol through your body. LDL cholesterol is what people mean when they talk about “bad” cholesterol. It sticks to the walls of your arteries, making it harder for blood to flow through. This can lead to coronary artery disease, heart attack and stroke.
- **High-density lipoproteins (HDL)** carry extra cholesterol back to your liver, so it can be removed from your body. HDL cholesterol is the “good cholesterol.”

To help yourself remember which type of cholesterol is which, think of the H in HDL as standing for “Healthy.”

### You can improve your cholesterol levels

Visit your doctor to find out what your cholesterol levels are, and whether you need to make lifestyle changes to bring your levels into a healthy range.<sup>2</sup> There are also medications that can help lower your cholesterol, but like all medications, they can cause side effects. Even if you don't have high cholesterol now, a healthy lifestyle can help keep your levels low as you get older.<sup>2</sup>

### What are healthy cholesterol levels?<sup>5</sup>

Cholesterol levels are measured in milligrams (mg) of cholesterol per deciliter (dL) of blood.

- Total cholesterol: less than 200 mg/dL
- LDL cholesterol (“bad” cholesterol): less than 100 mg/dL
- HDL cholesterol (“good” cholesterol): 60 mg/dL or higher
- Triglycerides (another kind of fat found in the blood): less than 150 mg/dL



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<sup>1</sup> Mayo Clinic website, High Cholesterol (accessed March 2015): mayoclinic.org

<sup>2</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website: Cholesterol (accessed March 2015): cdc.gov/cholesterol/facts.htm

<sup>3</sup> American Heart Association website: Cholesterol (accessed March 2015): heart.org

<sup>4</sup> WebMD, The Basics of Cholesterol (accessed March 2015): webmd.com

<sup>5</sup> National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute website: How is High Blood Cholesterol Diagnosed? (accessed March 2015): nhlbi.nih.gov/health/health-topics/topics/hbc/diagnosis

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Healthy habits that can help keep cholesterol in check include:<sup>1</sup>

- **Lose any extra weight.** Even five or ten pounds can make a difference in your cholesterol levels.
- **Eat heart-healthy foods.** A fiber-rich diet can help as much as medicine to lower cholesterol for some people. Choose whole grains, lean meats, fish, skim milk, and fresh fruits and vegetables. Aim for less than 300 milligrams (mg) of cholesterol in your daily diet.
- **Exercise regularly.** As long as your doctor gives you the okay, try to work in up to an hour of exercise each day. Regular exercise can improve your cholesterol levels.
- **Quit smoking.** Quitting smoking can improve your HDL (“good”) cholesterol level.

## Are you at risk?

High cholesterol has no symptoms — only a blood test will tell you if you have a problem. But there are some risk factors that make you more likely to get high cholesterol.<sup>2</sup>

- **Diet.** A diet high in saturated fat and trans fatty acids or trans fats will raise your cholesterol level. These unhealthy fats are mostly found in animal fat and hydrogenated vegetable oil. Foods from animal sources, such as egg yolks, meat and dairy products, also add cholesterol to your diet.
- **Weight and physical activity.** Being overweight tends to increase LDL cholesterol levels and decrease HDL cholesterol levels. Not getting enough exercise can lead to weight gain.
- **Heredity.** For some people, high cholesterol runs in their families.
- **Age and gender.** LDL cholesterol levels rise as people age, and men tend to have lower levels of the “good” HDL cholesterol than women. Women usually have lower LDL cholesterol levels than men until about age 55, but then their LDL levels tend to be higher.

## Helpful resources

Visit the American Heart Association online at [heart.org](http://heart.org) for tools, recipes and more. Or, check out WebMD’s Cholesterol Management Center at [webmd.com](http://webmd.com).

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Visit [empireblue.com](http://empireblue.com) for more ways to get healthy — and stay healthy.

