

Understanding Cholesterol

What is cholesterol?

Cholesterol is a soft, waxy substance that carries digested fat from your liver to parts of your body that need fat for energy and healing. It also carries fat to “fat storage sites” in your body such as your stomach and hips. Your liver produces most of the cholesterol in your body. But some comes from eating foods high in cholesterol and saturated fats.

Cholesterol and fat travel in your bloodstream in packages called **lipoproteins**. Lipoproteins are classified by their density, and different types play different roles in your health.

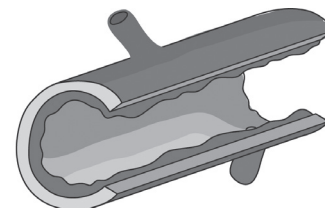
What are the different types of cholesterol and fat — and are they all bad?

A certain amount of fat and cholesterol in your blood is healthy and normal. But too much — or abnormal levels of certain types — can cause problems. For example, all of the following increase your risk of heart attack or stroke:

- **High levels of LDL cholesterol (“bad cholesterol”).** LDLs are low-density lipoproteins. These carry the largest amount of cholesterol in the blood. When you have too much LDL cholesterol in your bloodstream, it can build up in the walls of your arteries. This contributes to atherosclerosis.
- **Low levels of HDL cholesterol (“good cholesterol”).** HDLs are high-density lipoproteins. Too little HDL cholesterol in your bloodstream can also be risky. That’s because HDL cholesterol removes some of the LDL cholesterol from the artery walls, preventing or slowing the buildup of dangerous plaque. You want high levels of this “good” HDL to help keep your arteries clear — and your heart protected.

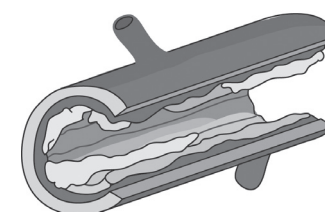
Healthy artery

A smooth, flexible artery carries blood efficiently to your heart.



Unhealthy artery

Cholesterol, fat, and other materials narrow the artery and limit blood flow. This puts you at risk of heart attack or stroke.



- **High levels of triglycerides.** Triglyceride is the most common type of fat in your blood. Studies show that many people who have heart disease have high triglyceride levels. High triglyceride levels, combined with low HDL cholesterol or high LDL cholesterol, seem to speed up atherosclerosis.

What does “high cholesterol” mean?

People use the term “high cholesterol” to describe several different conditions:

- High total cholesterol
- High LDL cholesterol
- Low HDL cholesterol
- High triglycerides

Each of these conditions is a risk factor for heart attack and stroke.

If you’re over 20, you should have a blood test to check your cholesterol levels at least every 5 years.

Do my cholesterol levels put me at risk for heart attack and stroke?

It depends. In the past, you were considered to be at risk for heart attack and stroke if you had high cholesterol. Now we look at a number of factors. These include:

- Your cholesterol levels
- Your age and sex
- Whether you smoke
- Whether you have diabetes or high blood pressure
- Whether you have certain other chronic health conditions
- Whether you have family history of heart attack or stroke

You and your healthcare providers should consider your personal risk factors together. This will help you make the best plan to lower your risk.

What can I do to lower my cholesterol?

If you have high cholesterol, follow these tips:

- **Change your eating habits.** Limit cholesterol and saturated fat in your daily diet. See Intermountain Healthcare's *Nutrition for a Healthy Heart* for more information and ideas:
intermountainhealthcare.org/prevention
- **Get more exercise.** Increasing your physical activity can also help balance cholesterol levels and keep your arteries clear.
- **Take medications as prescribed.** If you can't lower your cholesterol with diet and exercise alone, your doctor might prescribe medication to help. For example, statins are commonly used cholesterol medications.



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