

Understanding Cholesterol

What is cholesterol?

Cholesterol [kuh-LES-tuh-rohl] 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 how dense they are, and different types play different roles in your health.

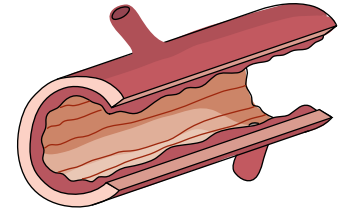
What are the different types of cholesterol and fat — and are they all bad?

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 cause a condition called atherosclerosis [ath-uh-roh-skluh-ROH-sis] — a build up of dangerous “plaque” in the walls of your arteries.
- **Low levels of HDL cholesterol (“good cholesterol”).** HDLs are high-density lipoproteins that remove some of the LDL from the artery walls, preventing or slowing the buildup of plaque. Thus, having too little HDL cholesterol in your bloodstream can also be risky.

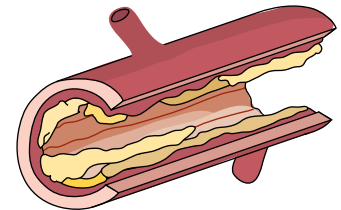
Healthy artery

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** [trahy-GLIS-uh-rahyd s]. 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, doctors look at a number of factors. These include your cholesterol levels, age, and sex as well as whether or not you:

- Smoke
- Have diabetes or high blood pressure
- Have certain other chronic health conditions
- Have a 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. Review 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 medicines as prescribed.** If you can't lower your cholesterol with diet and exercise alone, your doctor might prescribe medicine, such as a statin, to help manage your cholesterol.



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



Questions for my doctor

Intermountain Healthcare complies with applicable federal civil rights laws and does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, disability, or sex. Se proveen servicios de interpretación gratis. Hable con un empleado para solicitarlo. 我們將根據您的需求提供免費的口譯服務。請找尋工作人員協助

© 2009 - 2017 Intermountain Healthcare. All rights reserved. The content presented here is for your information only. It is not a substitute for professional medical advice, and it should not be used to diagnose or treat a health problem or disease. Please consult your healthcare provider if you have any questions or concerns. More health information is available at intermountainhealthcare.org. Patient and Provider Publications FS153-02/17 (Last reviewed -02/17) Also available in Spanish.