

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.

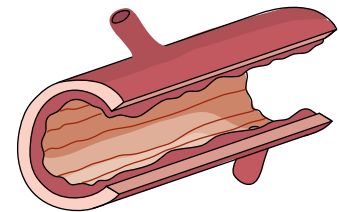
What does “high cholesterol” mean?

People use the term “high cholesterol” to describe several different conditions. **All can increase your risk of heart attack or stroke:**

- **High levels of LDL cholesterol (“bad cholesterol”).** LDL cholesterol is a low-density lipoprotein. It carries 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]. This is a build up of dangerous “plaque” [plak] in the walls of your arteries.
- **Low levels of HDL cholesterol (“good cholesterol”).** HDL cholesterol is a high-density lipoprotein that removes 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.
- **High levels of triglycerides** [trahy-GLIS-uh-rahids]. 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.

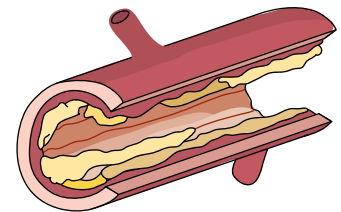
Healthy artery

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



Unhealthy artery

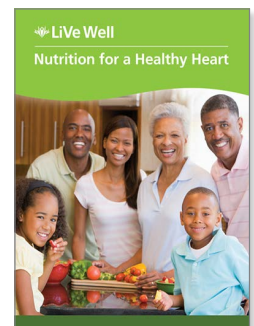
Cholesterol, fat, and other materials narrow the artery and limit blood flow. This puts you at risk of heart attack or stroke.



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. Ask your doctor for a copy of Intermountain Healthcare’s Nutrition for a Healthy Heart: 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.

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.



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

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