

## **American Academy of Family Physicians**

Peer Review Status: Externally Peer Reviewed by the American Academy of Family Physicians

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### **What is Cholesterol?**

Cholesterol is a type of fat made by your liver. Cholesterol is also contained in certain foods that you eat, such as eggs, meat and dairy products. When you eat these foods often, the amount of cholesterol in your blood is increased. Foods high in saturated fat can also raise the amount of cholesterol in your blood, because your liver turns saturated fat into cholesterol.

Cholesterol travels through the blood in different types of packages called lipoproteins. The low-density lipoprotein (LDL) delivers cholesterol to the body. The high-density lipoprotein (HDL) removes cholesterol from the blood stream.

### **How can a high cholesterol level hurt my health?**

Too much cholesterol in your blood can raise your risk of a heart attack or a stroke. Extra cholesterol may be stored in your arteries (large blood vessels) and cause them to become narrow. The amount of cholesterol in an artery wall may be so large that the artery becomes blocked and blood can't flow through it. If an artery that supplies blood to your heart becomes blocked, you may have a heart attack. If an artery that supplies blood to your brain becomes blocked, you may have a stroke.

### **When should I begin having my cholesterol level checked?**

In general, you should start having your cholesterol level checked when you are about 20 years old. After that, you should have your cholesterol checked at least once every five years.

Depending on what your cholesterol level is and whether you have other risk factors for heart disease, you may need to have your cholesterol checked more often. Talk to your family doctor about how often you need to be tested. Children as young as two years old should have their cholesterol checked if a close relative, such as a grandparent, had heart disease before age 55, or if a close relative has high cholesterol ( a level of 240 or above).

### **What should my cholesterol level be?**

The best total cholesterol level is under 200. A level between 200 and 239 means you have some risk for heart attack or stroke. A cholesterol level of 240 or more means that you have an increased risk for heart disease.

Lipoprotein levels (HDL and LDL) are also important. Your doctor may want to find out what your HDL and LDL levels are if you have a family history of heart disease before age 50 or if you have a high cholesterol level. If your total cholesterol level is high because of a high LDL level, you may have a higher risk for heart disease or stroke. If your total level is high only because of a high HDL level, you probably do not have an increased risk of heart disease.

An LDL cholesterol level of less than 130 is best. An LDL level of 160 or higher means you have an increased risk for heart disease. An HDL cholesterol level of less than 35 puts you at higher risk for heart disease, while an HDL level of 60 or above reduces your risk.

### **What can I do to lower my cholesterol level?**

Eating healthy food can help lower your LDL cholesterol level, and it may protect you from the damaging effects of cholesterol. You can raise your HDL cholesterol level by exercising, quitting smoking (if you smoke) and losing weight (if you're overweight).

Eating healthy foods usually lowers cholesterol levels. Here are some tips on eating smart:

- Eat more fruits and vegetables.
- Eat more broiled or grilled fish and skinless chicken and less fried meats.

- Choose lean cuts (pieces of meat containing little visible fat) when you eat beef, pork and lamb. Also, cut down on the amount of meat you eat.
- Eat a variety of fiber-rich foods, like oats, whole-grain breads and apples. Fiber helps reduce cholesterol levels. Fiber-rich foods can also help when you're trying to lose weight, because they make you feel full.
- Limit your intake of saturated fats, like dairy fats (in ice cream and butter) and palm and coconut oils (in baked goods). It helps to read the labels on food packages. A label may say the food is low in cholesterol, but the food could still be high in saturated fats. When you see these ingredients on the package label: palm oil, coconut oil, partially saturated vegetable oil and hydrogenated vegetable oil, you know that product is high in saturated fat.
- Limit high cholesterol foods, like egg yolks and liver. Eat no more than four egg yolks a week.
- Use low-fat dairy products: skim milk, nonfat yogurt and ice milk.

**What should I do if exercising and eating healthy foods do not lower my cholesterol level enough?**

If eating healthy, exercising and making other changes in your life (such as stopping smoking) do not lower your cholesterol level after about six months, your doctor may want to discuss using medicine to lower your cholesterol level. This may be a lifelong treatment, so it should be thought about only if healthy habits do not work.

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This information provides a general overview on lowering cholesterol levels and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this information applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor. This handout is provided to you by your family doctor and the American Academy of Family Physicians. It is adapted from "Cholesterol: What You Can Do to Lower Your Level," a brochure in the AAFP patient education brochure series, Health Notes from Your Family Doctor.