

Your Heart and Cholesterol

Your heart is a strong muscle that pumps blood through your body. Blood carries oxygen (ox-i-jen, part of the air we breathe), and your heart needs a lot of oxygen. Arteries, or blood vessels, are tubes that bring fresh blood and oxygen to the heart and the rest of your body. If your arteries get blocked, enough blood can't get to your heart. This causes heart disease. More American men and women die from heart disease than anything else.

High cholesterol (cole-es-ter-all, a waxy film that can build up and clog your blood flow) is the main reason that people get heart disease.

Your blood carries cholesterol through your arteries to different parts of your body. Some of that cholesterol is made in your liver. The rest of it comes from what you eat. Your body needs some cholesterol to work right.

What is cholesterol?

Cholesterol is white, waxy, and powdery. You can't see it, taste it, or smell it.

Your body needs some cholesterol to work right. But too much of the wrong kind of cholesterol can cause problems.

"Good" vs "Bad" Cholesterol

When you have too much fat in your body, that fat changes into LDL or what is called "bad" cholesterol.

Sometimes, LDL cholesterol sticks to the walls of your arteries. Over time, this blocks your arteries, and the blood flow slows down. Blocked arteries can lead to heart disease.

The other kind of cholesterol, called HDL, helps free some of the LDL cholesterol from the walls of your arteries, allowing your blood to flow better. That is why HDL is called "good" cholesterol.

The 2 ways you get cholesterol

Some families have livers that make *too much* LDL cholesterol; if your parents or grandparents had high cholesterol, that may be why. You can't change that.

Cholesterol and heart disease

Too much cholesterol can slow or stop blood flow:

- When the blood flow slows down a lot, you could have chest pain or high blood pressure.
- When the blood flow stops or is blocked, you could have a heart attack.
- When blood flow to the brain stops or is blocked, you could have a stroke.

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Know your level

But you *can* change what you eat. Eating a low-fat diet can help lower your LDL cholesterol to a certain number. Ask your doctor what your LDL cholesterol number should be.

The only way to know if you have high cholesterol is to go to your doctor for a blood test. If you lower your cholesterol, you can cut your chance of having a heart attack, needing surgery, or dying because your heart failed.

Know your cholesterol goal

Know your level. Know what your level should be. And if you need to, work with your doctor to lower your cholesterol level with diet and exercise.

And, if that's not enough, ask your doctor about drugs that may help. Your doctor will determine how low your bad cholesterol target should be based on risk factors such as diabetes, high blood pressure, smoking, or family history of heart disease.

What should my cholesterol level be?

The National Cholesterol Education Program recommends these goals:

Risk Category	Bad Cholesterol Target Level
Lower Risk	<160 mg/dL
Moderate Risk	<130 mg/dL
High Risk	<100 mg/dL
Very High Risk (Therapeutic Option)	<70 mg/dL

Eating a low-fat diet can help lower your LDL cholesterol to a certain number. See the chart above or ask your doctor what your number should be.

