

Blood Cholesterol and Heart Disease

Blood cholesterol is a fat-like substance in the blood. Blood cholesterol levels have a direct correlation to risk for heart disease and heart attack. Each year more than a million Americans have heart attacks, and about half a million die from heart disease. Finding a problem early allows you to make lifestyle changes before it is too late. Follow your doctor's advice about how often to have your cholesterol tested.

How Does High Blood Cholesterol Cause Heart Disease or a Heart Attack?

There are two types of blood cholesterol, the "good" and the "bad." Low-Density Lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol is known as the "bad" cholesterol. It is the cholesterol that can build up inside the artery, causing blockage that leads to heart attacks. High-density lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol is the "good" cholesterol and prevents arteries from being clogged.

High cholesterol does not cause symptoms so many people are unaware that their cholesterol level is too high. A blood test called a lipid profile will measure total cholesterol, LDL, HDL, and triglycerides. Triglycerides are a common type of fat found in food. High triglycerides are often found in people who have high cholesterol levels.

Knowing Your Numbers

According to the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute the following are general guidelines for cholesterol. Cholesterol levels are measured in milligrams of cholesterol per deciliter of blood.

- **Total cholesterol:** Below 200 mg/dL is desirable; 200-239 mg/dL is borderline high; and 240 mg/dL is considered high.
- **LDL cholesterol:** Below 100mg/dL is desirable. 100-129 mg/dL is near optimal; 130 – 159 mg/dL is borderline high; 160–189 mg/dL is considered high and 190 mg/dL and above is very high.
- **HDL cholesterol:** Below 40 mg/dL is considered bad; 40-59 mg/dL is better and 60 mg/dL and above is best.
- **Triglycerides:** Below 150 mg/dL is desirable; 150-199 mg/dL is borderline high; 200-499 mg/dL is high; and 500 or above is considered very high.

How Can I Lower My Cholesterol?

If LDL cholesterol levels are high, doctors will recommend diet and lifestyle changes:

- **TLC (Therapeutic Lifestyle Changes) diet.** This diet stresses foods low in saturated fat and low in cholesterol. Soluble fiber is also emphasized, such as that found in oats, dried peas and beans, and fruits like pears and oranges. It also includes foods like fat-free or 1% dairy products, lean meats, fish, whole grains, fruits and vegetables. This diet advises little or NO trans fats.
- **Weight loss.** Losing weight can help lower LDL, triglyceride, and total cholesterol levels. It can also help raise HDL levels.
- **Exercise.** Physical activity for 30 minutes on most days will help improve your cholesterol and fitness levels.
- **Cholesterol-lowering medication.** There are several types of medications to help lower cholesterol. Consult your doctor to find out whether treatment with drugs is needed and which type of drug would be best for you.

See www.americanheart.org/cholesterol for a cholesterol tracker tool that you can use to track your progress.