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# Cholesterol Basics

## Understanding Cholesterol and What You Can Do To Manage It

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Knowing terms like “LDL-C,” “HDL-C,” and “triglycerides” can help you manage your cholesterol.

You may have talked with your doctor about managing your cholesterol, specifically lowering your LDL-C (bad cholesterol). One reason to understand LDL-C in particular is that it can play a role in a disease called atherosclerosis (athero for short), the progressive buildup of plaque in the arteries.

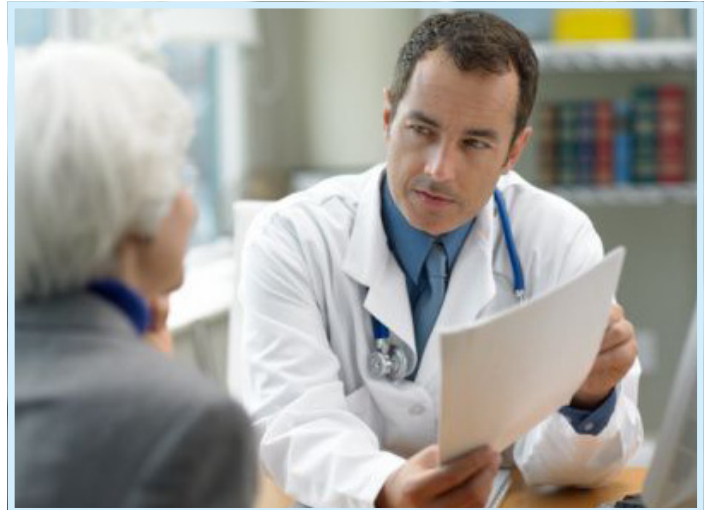
So please take a few minutes to read through the information here. While terms like LDL-C, HDL-C, and triglycerides can sometimes be confusing, it's important to understand them, and to understand how your lifestyle choices can have a major impact on your overall health.

### Not All Cholesterol Is Bad

Cholesterol is a lipid that travels through the bloodstream packaged inside a protein called a lipoprotein. There are two lipoproteins your doctor or health care professional may discuss with you — low-density lipoprotein (LDL) and high-density lipoprotein (HDL). There's also another substance doctors evaluate, called triglycerides.

Most of the cholesterol in our blood is made within our bodies, by the liver. It's also found in foods high in saturated fat. It's a vital part of the structure and functioning of our cells. However, too much cholesterol in your blood may lead to atherosclerosis.

Let's take a look at how LDL-C, HDL-C, and triglycerides function in your body.



**LDL (bad) cholesterol** is a lipoprotein that carries cholesterol throughout the bloodstream as LDL cholesterol, or LDL-C. If you have too much LDL-C circulating in your bloodstream, it can contribute to the buildup of plaque in your arteries. That's why it's so important to talk to your doctor. As a rule, you want to keep your LDL-C low.

**HDL (good) cholesterol** is considered “good” because it helps return cholesterol to the liver, where it can be eliminated from the body. As a rule, you want your HDL cholesterol high.

**Triglycerides** are another fat produced by the liver and also found in food. Like high cholesterol, they can be dangerous to your health. As a rule, you want to keep your triglycerides low.

## By the Numbers

When you get a cholesterol test, your doctor will give you a series of numbers that measure the amount of different types of cholesterol in your blood. Blood cholesterol levels are measured in milligrams per deciliter of blood (mg/dL). Depending on whether or not you fasted before your test, your results may only include two numbers.

- Total cholesterol
- HDL-C

If you are fasting, your results may include:

- Total cholesterol
- LDL-C
- HDL-C
- Triglycerides

Your total cholesterol is based on your LDL cholesterol (LDL-C), HDL cholesterol (HDL-C), and triglyceride counts. Generally, a lower number for total cholesterol is better.

The tables on the right were developed by the National Cholesterol Education Program (NCEP) to set guidelines for total cholesterol, LDL-C, HDL-C, and triglycerides. These guidelines put cholesterol numbers in different heart disease risk categories, ranging from normal to very high.

While the test will give you an idea of where your numbers fall, the same numbers can mean different things for different people.

And remember, cholesterol isn't just about numbers — it's about being aware of what they mean to your overall health and to the progression of atherosclerosis.

Don't be afraid to ask what your cholesterol number means, based on your complete health history.

### TOTAL CHOLESTEROL LEVEL

Less than 200 mg/dL	Desirable
200-239 mg/dL	Borderline high
240 mg/dL or higher	High

### LDL "BAD" CHOLESTEROL

Less than 100 mg/dL	Optimal
100-129 mg/dL	Near optimal/above optimal
130-159 mg/dL	Borderline high
160-189 mg/dL	High
190 mg/dL or higher	Very high

### TRIGLYCERIDES (TG)

Less than 150 mg/dL	Normal
150-199 mg/dL	Borderline high
200-499 mg/dL	High
500 mg/dL or higher	Very high

### HDL "GOOD" CHOLESTEROL

60 mg/dL or higher	Desirable
Less than 40 mg/dL	Low

The NCEP Interim Report guidelines suggest that some people may benefit from getting their LDL-C even lower, to below 70 mg/dL. And some people for whom a goal of less than 130 mg/dL was previously recommended may benefit from getting their LDL-C to less than 100 mg/dL. Depending on your health profile, lower cholesterol goals may be right for you. Your doctor will evaluate your numbers and decide on an appropriate LDL cholesterol goal.

## Other Cholesterol-related Terms

Conversations with your doctor about cholesterol often contain new terms you may not be familiar with. Here are a few key words that are important for you to know, along with their definitions.

**Monounsaturated Fat:** An unsaturated fat found primarily in plant-based foods such as olive and canola oils. Monounsaturated fats are liquid at room temperature. Eating more monounsaturated fats (instead of saturated fats such as butter and lard) can help lower cholesterol.

**Polyunsaturated Fat:** An unsaturated fat found primarily in plant-based foods such as corn, sunflower, safflower, and soybean oils. Polyunsaturated fats are liquid or soft at room temperature. Eating more polyunsaturated fats (instead of saturated fats such as butter and lard) can lower cholesterol.

### Knowing the bad from the good

An easy way to remember which is the bad cholesterol and which is the good is to think of the first letter of each:

**LDL** is bad, and you will want to keep it **Low**

**HDL** is good, and you will want to keep it **High**

**Saturated Fat:** Saturated fats are usually found in animal products, including fatty meat and dairy products, and are usually solid at room temperature. However, they are also found in some vegetable oils, including coconut and palm oils.

**Trans Fats:** A number of ingredients do not contain the word “fat” in their names, but they are high in fat content, particularly saturated fat. Examples include glycerol, hydrogenated fats and oils, coconut and coconut oil, palm oil, and palm kernel oil.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### Q: Where does cholesterol come from?

**A:** Cholesterol is produced by the liver. It’s also found in foods high in saturated fat, like fatty meats, egg yolks, shellfish, and whole-milk dairy products.

### Q: What makes cholesterol good or bad for your health?

**A:** Cholesterol travels through the bloodstream packaged inside a protein called a lipoprotein. There are two kinds of lipoproteins your doctor might discuss with you — LDL (bad) cholesterol (LDL-C) and HDL (good) cholesterol (HDL-C). LDL cholesterol is considered “bad” because too much of it in your bloodstream can contribute to the progression of atherosclerosis, the buildup of plaque in your arteries. HDL cholesterol is considered “good” because it helps return cholesterol to the liver, where it can be eliminated.

### Q: How does LDL cholesterol contribute to health problems?

**A:** If you have too much LDL cholesterol circulating in your bloodstream, it can begin to build up in your arteries, a disease process called atherosclerosis. For many people, this buildup starts in early adulthood and gets worse over time.

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**Q: How does my medical history relate to managing my cholesterol?**

**A:** Ask your doctor to be sure. If your doctor has told you cholesterol management is especially important for you, it could mean that you have one or more additional health factors that make it even more likely that high cholesterol can contribute to the buildup of plaque in your arteries.

These health factors include things like high blood pressure, personal or family history of early heart disease, obesity, and cigarette smoking. And some diseases, such as diabetes, call for close cholesterol management. Be sure to talk to your doctor for more information about your personal medical history.

**Q: How do I find out what my cholesterol numbers mean?**

**A:** The National Cholesterol Education Program (NCEP) publishes general cholesterol guidelines, but based on your individual situation, your doctor may recommend something more specific. Take a look at the general NCEP guidelines for cholesterol shown in this guide, and then talk to your doctor about your specific goals.

**Q: How can I lower my cholesterol?**

**A:** Living a healthy lifestyle, such as eating a diet that is low in saturated fats and cholesterol and getting at least 30 minutes of exercise most days, may help lower cholesterol. It also may be able to help you manage other health factors associated with the progression of atherosclerosis. When diet and exercise alone aren't enough, your doctor may add a cholesterol-lowering medicine.