

Your Test: Cholesterol Test



What is cholesterol?

Cholesterol is a type of fat that is made in the body. Cells need it to work right. But too much of it can clog your blood vessels. This can lead to heart disease (coronary artery disease), which can cause a heart attack or stroke. Diet changes and exercise can lower the fat in your blood. You also may need to take medicine.

Cholesterol test results

A blood test is used to check your cholesterol levels. Your test will show several results:

Total cholesterol levels. The lower your total cholesterol, the better. High total cholesterol can raise your chances of getting heart disease.

LDL (low-density lipoprotein) or "bad" cholesterol. The lower your LDL, the better. High LDL can raise your chances of getting heart disease.

HDL (high-density lipoprotein) or "good" cholesterol. The higher your HDL, the better. HDL helps remove bad cholesterol from your blood. High HDL can lower your chances of getting heart disease.

Triglycerides. The lower your triglycerides, the better. These are a kind of fat the body needs to store energy. But high triglyceride levels may raise your chances of getting heart disease.

What do your cholesterol levels mean?

The following are general guidelines. Talk to your doctor about your target cholesterol levels. They may vary depending on your health and your risk for certain health problems.

Total cholesterol

Best	Less than 200
Borderline high	200 to 239
High	240 or higher

LDL or "bad" cholesterol

Best	Less than 100
Near best or above best	101 to 129
Borderline high	130 to 159
High	160 to 189
Very high	190 and above

HDL or "good" cholesterol

Best	60 or higher
Acceptable	40 to 59
Low	Below 40

Triglycerides

Best	Less than 150
Borderline high	150 to 199
High	200 to 499
Very high	500 or higher

What causes high cholesterol?

Eating foods high in saturated fat, trans fat, and cholesterol. Saturated fat and cholesterol are in foods that come from animals, such as meats, whole milk, egg yolks, butter, and cheese. Trans fat is found in fried foods and packaged foods, such as cookies, crackers, and chips.

Your weight. Being overweight may raise triglycerides and lower HDL ("good" cholesterol).

Your activity level. Not exercising may raise triglycerides and lower HDL ("good" cholesterol).

Your overall health. Having certain diseases, such as hypothyroidism, may raise your risk of high cholesterol.

Your age. After you reach age 20, your cholesterol starts to rise. In men, cholesterol levels usually level off after age 50. In women, cholesterol levels stay fairly low until menopause. After that, they rise to about the same level as in men.

Your family. A disease called a lipid disorder also can cause high cholesterol. This rare problem runs in families.

Cigarette smoking. Smoking can lower your HDL or "good" cholesterol.

How can you lower your cholesterol?

Talk with your doctor about how to lower your cholesterol. Find out what choices are best for you. Diet and other lifestyle changes may be enough. You may need to:

- Eat heart-healthy foods. Include plenty of fish, fruits, vegetables, beans, and high-fiber grains and breads. Also include healthy fats like olive oil.
- Get regular exercise.
- Lose weight.
- Quit smoking.

If your cholesterol is still too high after you have tried lifestyle changes for a few months, you may need to take a medicine such as a statin. If you have high blood pressure, diabetes, or coronary artery disease (CAD), your doctor may want you to take medicine right away to lower your chances of having a heart attack.

Where can you find out more?

American Heart Association

1-800-AHA-USA1 (1-800-242-8721) or www.americanheart.org

National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute

(301) 592-8573 or www.nhlbi.nih.gov