

Cholesterol and Coronary Heart Disease

What Is Coronary Heart Disease?

In coronary heart disease (CHD), the coronary arteries that feed the heart have become narrower — clogged by deposits — so the heart can't get enough oxygen-carrying blood. When this happens, a person may feel chest pain, called *angina*. If a coronary artery becomes completely blocked, the blockage can cause a heart attack. CHD is very serious. It's the No. 1 killer of women and men in the United States.



How Is High Cholesterol Involved?

Your body actually needs cholesterol to function properly. But having too much of this fatty substance in your blood can lead to a condition called *atherosclerosis* (ath-er-o-skleh-RO-sis). That’s the medical term for “hardening of the arteries”—including the coronary arteries that supply the heart. Over time, excess cholesterol and fat can get deposited in artery walls. When the coronary arteries become clogged and narrowed in this way, the result can be coronary heart disease (CHD), including angina and heart attack.

Why Is Managing Cholesterol So Important?

Since too much cholesterol in the blood can lead to CHD, following your doctor’s instructions to bring your cholesterol levels down is important. And if you already have CHD, lowering your cholesterol is even more important to reduce your risk of having a heart attack.

What Can I Do?

The best way to protect your health is to follow the treatment plan recommended by your doctor. You want to do all you can to lower your “bad” low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol, which creates most of the excess buildup in artery walls. You can lower your LDL cholesterol by cutting down on saturated fat and cholesterol in your diet, getting more exercise, and staying at a healthy weight. Your doctor may also prescribe medication.

According to the American Heart Association, fully *half of all Americans aged 20 and older* have cholesterol levels that are too high. So if your doctor has told you that you have high cholesterol, you have lots of company. And you have lots of reasons to reduce your risk of CHD by adopting healthy eating and exercise habits—and sticking with them. If your doctor also wants you to take medication, be sure to take it exactly as prescribed.

Risk Factors: What Can and Can't Be Changed

Several things, called “risk factors,” can increase your risk of CHD. You can change some of these risk factors, but not others.

Risk factors you can change or treat

- High blood cholesterol—The higher the cholesterol levels, the bigger the risk of CHD and stroke
- Smoking—Quit smoking. Smokers have twice the risk of heart attack as nonsmokers
- High blood pressure—In combination with other conditions like diabetes or obesity, high blood pressure can multiply your risk
- Lack of exercise—Physical inactivity alone increases your risk for CHD
- Obesity/overweight—Even without other risk factors, having too much body fat puts you at higher risk for CHD
- Diabetes mellitus—Having this disease seriously boosts the risk of developing heart or blood vessel disease

Risk factors that can't be changed

- Advancing age—People who are aged 65 and over represent 85% of CHD deaths
- Being male—The risk of heart attack is greater for men than for women
- Heredity—Having a parent, brother, sister, or child with CHD is a major risk factor



Remember

Having high cholesterol can increase your chances of developing CHD. And people who already have CHD need to be especially careful about their blood cholesterol levels. Some risk factors for CHD can be changed, some can't. Make the healthy changes that are within your control.

Talk with your doctor about what you can do to manage your cholesterol—and take it to heart.