

Understand Cholesterol and Your Numbers

When we step on a scale, our weight is measured as a single number. When we tell our age, that's another single number. But when it comes to cholesterol, *several* numbers are important. Since high cholesterol has no visible symptoms, many people aren't even aware they have it. Because lowering high cholesterol levels reduces the chance of heart disease, understanding your numbers is an important part of your own good health.



Just What Is Cholesterol?

Cholesterol is a fatty substance called a lipid. It travels in the blood, attaching to proteins, forming lipoproteins. Your body actually needs cholesterol in order to function properly. If you have too much, though, it can reduce blood flow, and increase your risk of heart disease and stroke.

A blood test called a “lipoprotein profile” measures the levels of different types of cholesterol and fat. This test shows your numbers for total cholesterol.

As you can see from the chart on the facing page, no single number tells the whole cholesterol story. Your doctor will recommend the best ways for you to get your cholesterol to the levels right for you—and keep them there.

Reading tip: *you want your levels of bad LDL cholesterol and triglycerides to be low. You want your good HDL cholesterol to be high.*

What Is Total Cholesterol?

- “Bad” low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol—the kind that can build up in your body
- “Good” high-density lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol—the kind that helps prevent cholesterol buildup
- “Triglycerides”—another kind of fat in your blood. High levels of these may be linked to heart disease



What the Numbers Mean

Experts with the NCEP (National Cholesterol Education Program) from the National Institutes of Health give the following guidelines for levels of cholesterol.

Note: the “mg/dL” after the numbers means that cholesterol is measured in milligrams (mg) of cholesterol per deciliter (dL) of blood.

Total Cholesterol Level	What They Mean
Less than 200 mg/dL	Desirable
200-239 mg/dL	Borderline high
240 mg/dL and above	High

LDL (Bad) Cholesterol Level*	What They Mean
Less than 100 mg/dL	Optimal
100-129 mg/dL	Near or above optimal
130-159 mg/dL	Borderline high
160-189 mg/dL	High
190 mg/dL or higher	Very high

HDL (Good) Cholesterol Level	What They Mean
60 mg/dL or higher	High
Less than 40 mg/dL	Low

Triglycerides Level	What They Mean
Less than 150 mg/dL	Normal
150-199 mg/dL	Borderline high
200-499 mg/dL	High
500 mg/dL or higher	Very high

Adapted from the National Cholesterol Education Program Adult Treatment Panel III Report.

*Your doctor may recommend reducing your bad LDL cholesterol below the levels indicated in this chart.

Remember

Age, Numbers, and Cholesterol

Just because you're a certain age doesn't mean you probably do—or probably don't—have high cholesterol. Experts recommend that everybody age 20 and over have a blood test performed at least every 5 years to find out their cholesterol levels.