



Why Does Your Cholesterol Number Matter? How Can You Keep It in Check?



You may have high cholesterol and not know it. Only a blood test by a doctor can uncover it. That's because it doesn't produce any symptoms at all—until significant damage is done. But knowing your cholesterol number, and keeping it down, can make the difference in your risk for life-threatening conditions such as heart disease or stroke.

Cholesterol is a type of fat that is a building block of our cell membranes. When the level of cholesterol is more than our body needs, the plaque coats the walls of our arteries, making it more difficult for blood to pass through to the heart and brain. Think of what happens when you pour grease down a drain. In much the same way, high cholesterol impairs your body's ability to function.

Understand Your Risk

Cholesterol is made up of LDL, low-density lipoprotein, and HDL, high-density lipoprotein. HDL actually slows the buildup of plaque; that's why one of my patients has named it "happy cholesterol." But if you have too high levels of LDL, aka "lousy cholesterol," you are at risk.

If you have high cholesterol, you're not alone. An estimated 98.9 million Americans age 20 and older have total blood cholesterol levels of 200 milligrams per deciliter or higher, a borderline high reading, according to the American Heart Association.¹ Of these individuals, 31.9 million have total cholesterol levels of 240 mg/dL or higher and are considered high-risk. People with heart disease and other chronic conditions need lower numbers than the general public.²

Learn Prevention and Treatment Options

A combination of diet and genetic factors determine our cholesterol levels. Some people's livers cannot handle even a moderate amount of cholesterol. Other people can handle more cholesterol, but they overwhelm their bodies with an inactive lifestyle and poor diet.

Here are six tips from the [CDC](#)³ to keep cholesterol levels in check:

1. Get a blood test every five years starting at age 20 to measure cholesterol as well as triglycerides.⁴
2. Eat a healthy diet.
3. Maintain a healthy weight.
4. Exercise regularly.
5. Don't smoke.
6. Treat high cholesterol with lifestyle changes and/or medication, if needed.

Some people need medication to control their cholesterol levels. If your physician prescribes medication, don't be resistant. Skipping your medication could be worse for your health than not taking it at all.

Enjoy your good health!

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¹ http://www.heart.org/idc/groups/heart-public/@wcm/@sop/@smd/documents/downloadable/ucm_319586.pdf

² <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/heart/chol/wyntk.htm>

³ http://www.cdc.gov/cholesterol/what_you_can_do.htm

⁴ <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/heart/chol/wyntk.htm>