



Cholesterol Myths and Facts

AT A GLANCE

Cholesterol can be confusing! Learn answers to common questions about blood cholesterol.

Component	Result	Units	Flag	Range	Comment
CHOL/HDL RATIO	3.5	(calc)		<5.0	
CHOLESTEROL, TOTAL	208	mg/dL	H	<200	
HDL CHOLESTEROL	59	mg/dL			
LDL-CHOLESTEROL	130	mg/dL			

Myth: All cholesterol is bad for you.

Fact: Some types of cholesterol are essential for good health. Your body needs cholesterol to perform important jobs, such as making hormones and building cells. Cholesterol travels through the blood on proteins called lipoproteins.

Two types of lipoproteins carry cholesterol throughout the body: low-density lipoprotein (LDL), sometimes called "bad" cholesterol, and high-density lipoprotein (HDL), or "good" cholesterol.

When your body has too much LDL cholesterol, it can build up in the walls of your blood vessels. This buildup is called plaque.

HDL, or "good" cholesterol, carries cholesterol back to the liver. The liver then flushes it from the body. High levels of HDL cholesterol can lower your risk for heart disease and stroke.

As your blood vessels build up plaque over time, the insides of the vessels narrow. This narrowing can restrict and eventually block blood flow to and from your heart and other organs. When blood flow to the heart is blocked, it can cause [angina](#) (chest pain) or a [heart attack](#).

[Learn more about LDL and HDL cholesterol and triglycerides.](#)

Myth: I would be able to feel it if I had high cholesterol.

Fact: There are usually no warning signs for high cholesterol. You may not know you have unhealthy cholesterol levels until it is too late—when you have a heart attack or stroke. That's why it's so important to get your cholesterol levels checked at least every 5 years. [1](#) Learn more about [getting your cholesterol checked](#).

Occasionally, some people develop yellowish growths on their skin called *xanthomas*, which are cholesterol-rich deposits. People with xanthomas may have high cholesterol levels.

Myth: Eating foods with a lot of cholesterol will not make my cholesterol levels go up.

Fact: It can be complicated. We know that foods with a lot of cholesterol usually also have a lot of saturated fat. Saturated fats can make your cholesterol numbers higher, so it's best to choose foods that are lower in saturated fats. Foods made from animals, including red meat, butter, and cheese, have a lot of saturated fats.

Instead, aim to eat foods with plenty of fiber, such as oatmeal and beans. Healthy unsaturated fats, such as avocados, olive oil, and nuts are also recommended.

Myth: I can't do anything to change my cholesterol levels.

Fact: You can do many things to improve your cholesterol levels and keep them in a healthy range!

- **Get tested at least every 5 years** (unless told otherwise by your doctor).^[1] Learn more about [cholesterol screenings](#).
- **Make healthy food choices.** Limit foods high in saturated fats. Choose foods naturally high in fiber and unsaturated fats. Learn more about healthy diets and nutrition at CDC's [Nutrition website](#).
- **Be active every day.** The *Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans* recommends that adults get 150 to 300 minutes of moderate physical activity each week. Learn more about [physical activity basics and tips](#).
- **Don't smoke or use tobacco products.** Smoking damages your blood vessels, speeds up the [hardening of the arteries](#), and greatly increases your risk for heart disease. If you don't smoke, don't start. If you do smoke, quitting will lower your risk for heart disease. Learn more about tobacco use and ways to quit at CDC's [smoking and tobacco use website](#).
- **Talk with your health care team** about ways to manage your cholesterol. If any medicines are given to you to manage your cholesterol, take them as they are prescribed. Learn more about [medicines to lower cholesterol](#).
- **Know your family history.** If your parents or other immediate family members have high cholesterol, you probably should be tested more often. You could have a condition called [familial hypercholesterolemia](#) (FH).

Myth: I don't need statins or other medicines for my cholesterol. I can manage my cholesterol with diet and exercise.

Fact: Although many people can achieve good cholesterol levels by making healthy food choices and getting enough physical activity, some people may also need medicines called statins to lower their cholesterol levels. [Guidelines](#) ² also suggest that other medicines in addition to statins may be needed to help control cholesterol.^[1]

The following people may need statins or other medicines to manage cholesterol levels:

- **People with FH or people with very high levels of "bad" cholesterol.** FH is a genetic condition that causes very high LDL ("bad") cholesterol levels beginning at a young age. If left untreated, cholesterol levels will continue to get worse. This greatly raises the risk for heart disease, heart attack, and stroke at a young age.
- **People with cardiovascular disease (CVD).** People with CVD may already have narrowed arteries because of too much plaque. Medicines that lower cholesterol may help reduce the risk for heart attack or stroke.
- **People with diabetes.** [Type 2 diabetes](#) lowers HDL ("good") cholesterol levels and raises "bad" cholesterol levels. This combination raises your risk of heart disease and stroke.

Other groups of people may also need medicines to manage their cholesterol, including people who have a high risk for CVD. Always talk with your health care team about the best ways to manage your cholesterol.

Resources

CDC and Million Hearts®

- [About High Cholesterol](#)
- [About Heart Disease](#)
- [About Stroke](#)
- [Familial Hypercholesterolemia](#)
- [The Scoop on Statins: What Do You Need to Know?](#) ²

SOURCES

CONTENT SOURCE:

National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion; About the Division for Heart Disease and Stroke Prevention

REFERENCES

1. Grundy SM, Stone NJ, Bailey AL, Beam C, Birtcher KK, Blumenthal RS, et al. [2018 AHA/ACC/AACVPR/AAPA/ABC/ACPM/ADA/AGS/APhA/ASPC/NLA/PCNA guideline on the management of blood cholesterol: a report of the American College of Cardiology/American Heart Association Task Force on Clinical Practice Guidelines](#). *Circulation*. 2019;139(25):e1082–e1143.

