

## Cholesterol Screening

### What is cholesterol?

Cholesterol is a substance that is found in the blood. Everyone has some. It is needed for good health. The problem is, people sometimes have too much cholesterol. Compared with people with normal cholesterol, people with high cholesterol have a higher risk of heart attacks, strokes, and other health problems. The higher your cholesterol, the higher your risk of these problems.

### Are there different types of cholesterol?

Yes, there are a few different types. If you get a cholesterol test, you might hear your doctor or nurse talk about:

- Total cholesterol
- LDL cholesterol – Some people call this the "bad" cholesterol. That's because having high LDL levels **raises** your risk of heart attacks, strokes, and other health problems.
- HDL cholesterol – Some people call this the "good" cholesterol. That's because people with high HDL levels tend to have a **lower** risk of heart attacks, strokes, and other health problems.
- Non-HDL cholesterol – Non-HDL cholesterol is your total cholesterol minus your HDL cholesterol.
- Triglycerides – Triglycerides are not cholesterol. They are another type of fat. But they often get measured when cholesterol is measured. (Having high triglycerides also seems to increase the risk of heart attacks and strokes.)

### What should my numbers be

Ask your doctor or nurse what your numbers should be. Different people need different goals. In general, people who do not already have heart disease should aim for:

- Total cholesterol below 200
- LDL cholesterol below 130 – or much lower, if they are at risk of heart attacks or strokes
- HDL cholesterol above 60

- Non-HDL cholesterol below 160 – or lower, if they are at risk of heart attacks or strokes
- Triglycerides below 150

Keep in mind, though, that many people who cannot meet these goals still have a low risk of heart attacks and strokes.

### **What should I do if my doctor says I have high cholesterol?**

Ask your doctor what your **overall** risk of heart attacks and strokes is. High cholesterol, by itself, is not always a reason to worry. Having high cholesterol is just one of many things that can increase your risk of heart attacks and strokes. Other factors that increase your risk include:

- Cigarette smoking
- High blood pressure
- Having a parent, sister, or brother who got heart disease at a young age – Young, in this case, means younger than 55 for men and younger than 65 for women.
- A diet that is not heart healthy – A "heart-healthy" diet includes lots of fruits and vegetables, fiber, and healthy fats (like those found in fish and certain oils). It also means limiting sugar and unhealthy fats.
- Older age

If you are at high risk of heart attacks and strokes, having high cholesterol is a problem. On the other hand, if you are at low risk, having high cholesterol might not lead to treatment.

### **Should I take medicine to lower cholesterol?**

Not everyone who has high cholesterol needs medicines. Your doctor or nurse will decide if you need them based on your age, family history, and other health concerns.

### **Can I lower my cholesterol without medicines?**

Yes, you can lower your cholesterol some by:

- Avoiding red meat, butter, fried foods, cheese, and other foods that have a lot of saturated fat
- Losing weight (if you are overweight)
- Being more active

Even if these steps do little to change your cholesterol, they can improve your health in many ways.

### **Can I lower my cholesterol by changing my diet?**

Maybe. Some people are able to lower their cholesterol by changing their diet. While this does not always work, you can still improve your overall health by eating better.

If you have high cholesterol, it might help to avoid or limit red meat, butter, fried foods, cheese, and other foods that have a lot of saturated fat. Other things that might help lower cholesterol include:

- Eating more soluble fiber – Soluble fiber is found in fruits, oats, barley, beans, and peas.
- A vegetarian or vegan diet – A vegetarian diet contains no meat. A vegan diet contains no animal products at all, including meat, eggs, or milk.
- Replacing meat with soy sometimes – Soy-based products include tofu and tempeh.

In general, you can improve your health by eating lots of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. You can also cut back on carbohydrates, sweets, and processed foods.

### **What about eggs?**

Eggs are OK if you want to eat them, but don't overdo it. The news often has stories about the health benefits or risks of eggs. The truth is, eggs are a good source of protein and do not raise cholesterol much. Saturated fats (like in red meat, butter, and fried foods) affect cholesterol levels more than eggs do.

### **Are there specific foods that can lower my cholesterol?**

There are some foods that seem to help lower cholesterol, including:

- **Foods rich in omega-3 fatty acids** – Foods rich in omega-3 fatty acids include oily fish, and olive and canola oil. These foods seem to raise good cholesterol and might lower certain types of bad cholesterol. More important, studies show that people who eat lots of these foods are less likely than those who eat less of them to have heart disease. If you want, it's fine to eat 1 to 2 servings of oily fish a week (such as salmon, herring, or tuna).
- **Nuts** – Some studies show that eating certain nuts, such as walnuts, almonds, and pistachios, can help lower cholesterol and even the risk of heart attack or death.
- **Fiber-rich foods** – Fiber-rich foods, such as fruits, vegetables, beans, and oats, seem to lower cholesterol and are generally good for your health. Some doctors even recommend fiber supplements.

### Should I take supplements to lower my cholesterol?

Some research has shown that certain supplements can lower cholesterol. But there is almost no research showing that supplements can help prevent heart attacks, strokes, or any of the problems caused by high cholesterol. If you decide to try supplements, always check with your physician first.

Here are some supplements that might help with cholesterol:

- **Red yeast rice** – This supplement can contain the same ingredient that is in a prescription medicine to lower cholesterol. Red yeast rice helps lower cholesterol, but the products that you can buy might not always have much of the active ingredient. If you are interested in taking red yeast rice for your cholesterol, you should speak with your doctor to see if the prescription medicine is a better choice.
- **Omega-3 fatty acid supplements** – Some omega-3 fatty acid supplements, such as krill oil supplements, might help lower cholesterol.