

National Cholesterol Education Month

September is National Cholesterol Education Month, which makes it a great time to learn more about cholesterol, get your blood cholesterol checked and take steps to lower it if it is high. High cholesterol increases your risk for heart disease and stroke, two leading causes of death in the United States.

What Is Cholesterol?

Cholesterol is a waxy, fat-like substance found in your body and many foods. Your body needs cholesterol to function normally and makes all that you need. Too much cholesterol can build up in your arteries. Over time, this buildup causes "hardening of the arteries" so that arteries become narrowed and blood flow to the heart is slowed down or blocked. The blood carries oxygen to the heart, and if enough blood and oxygen cannot reach your heart, you may suffer chest pain. If the blood supply to a portion of the heart is completely cut off by a blockage, the result is a heart attack.

When Should You Have Your Cholesterol Checked?

Everyone age 20 and older should have their cholesterol measured at least once every five years. The most accurate way is to have a blood test called a "lipoprotein profile" to find out your cholesterol numbers. This blood test is done after a 9- to 12-hour fast and gives information about your:

- **Total cholesterol:** A measure of the total amount of cholesterol in your blood. It includes both low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol and high-density lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol.
- **LDL (bad) cholesterol:** The main source of cholesterol buildup and blockage in the arteries.
- **HDL (good) cholesterol:** Helps keep cholesterol from building up in the arteries.
- **Triglycerides:** Another form of fat in your blood that can raise your risk for heart disease, especially in women.

Knowing your total cholesterol and HDL cholesterol can give you a general idea about your cholesterol levels. The following chart shows optimal lipid levels for adults:

Desirable Cholesterol Levels

Total cholesterol	Less than 170 mg/dL
Low LDL ("bad") cholesterol	Less than 110 mg/dL
High HDL ("good") cholesterol	35 mg/dL or higher
Triglycerides	Less than 150 mg/dL

If You Have High Cholesterol, What Can You Do to Lower It?

Your doctor may prescribe medications to treat your high cholesterol. Lifestyle changes can also lower your cholesterol levels:

Eat low-fat and high-fiber food, such as fresh fruits, vegetables and whole grains, and limit red and processed meats, as well as sodium and sugar-sweetened foods and beverages.

- For adults, get at least 2 hours and 30 minutes of moderate or 1 hour and 15 minutes of vigorous physical activity a week. For children and teens aged 6–17, aim for one hour or more of physical activity each day.
- Maintain a healthy weight. Being overweight or obese is likely to raise bad cholesterol and lower good cholesterol. But a weight loss of as little as 5% to 10% can help improve cholesterol numbers.
- Don't smoke, or if you do smoke, quit. Smoking damages the blood vessels and greatly increases the risk of heart disease and stroke.



Did You Know?

- High cholesterol is a major risk factor for heart disease, which is the leading cause of death in the United States.
- People with high cholesterol are twice as likely to have heart disease compared to people with lower cholesterol levels.
- 73.5 million American adults (31.7%) have high low-density lipoprotein (LDL), or "bad" cholesterol. But fewer than 1 out of every 3 adults with high LDL cholesterol has the condition under control.