

When You Have Heart Disease: What You Should Know About Lowering Your LDL Cholesterol

What should you know about cholesterol?

Cholesterol is carried in the blood by *lipoproteins*:

- Low-density lipoproteins, or LDL, carry most of the cholesterol in the blood. LDL is called bad cholesterol (think of “L” as in “Lousy”). It can stick to the walls of arteries and lead to a build-up of fatty plaque.
- High-density lipoproteins, or HDL, help the body get rid of LDL. HDL is called good cholesterol (think of “H” as in “Healthy”). A high level of HDL is linked with a low risk for heart disease.

Triglycerides are another fat in the blood. A high level of triglycerides may damage blood vessels and increase the risk for heart disease.

Why should your LDL-cholesterol be lower?

Most people with heart disease have too much LDL-cholesterol. LDL is the main cause of blockage in the arteries. To lower your risk for future heart attacks, the most important thing you can do is lower your LDL level.

How should your cholesterol be checked?

People with heart disease need more than a “finger-stick” blood check. You will need a blood test called a *lipoprotein profile*. This test will break down your total cholesterol number into HDL, LDL, and triglycerides. You will need to fast – nothing to eat or drink except water – for nine to 12 hours before this test.

What should your numbers be?

The latest guidelines show that if you have heart disease:

- Ideally, your LDL level should be 100 or less. Any decrease in your LDL will help decrease your risk.
- Your HDL level should be above 45 if you are a male, and above 55 if you are a female.
- Your triglyceride level should be below 200.

What can you do to lower your LDL?

Take medication as prescribed. Your health care provider may prescribe medications that can lower your cholesterol by changing how your liver makes cholesterol. You will receive information about your medications. When you start taking the medication, you will be asked to have blood work to measure your progress and to watch for side effects.

Follow a low-fat meal plan – even if you take cholesterol-lowering medications. Eat more fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. Limit fats, meats, and high-fat dairy products. Be sure you receive information that will help you choose and prepare foods that are low in saturated fat.

Exercise regularly. Physical activity can help lower your LDL and raise your HDL. It can also improve your heart and lung fitness and help you control your blood pressure, weight, and stress levels. Be sure to consult your health care provider before starting a new program.

Manage your weight. People who are overweight usually have higher blood cholesterol levels than people whose weight is normal. A low-fat meal plan and exercise should put you on the right track for weight control.

Important Points

- If you smoke, quitting is one of the best things you can do to help lower your risk for heart attack. If you need help quitting, ask your health care provider.
- Be sure you receive information on your medications and on the low-fat diet.
- **Remember:** Your medication is vital to lowering your LDL. Take it as prescribed. If you have questions or concerns, call your health care provider.