



## **Cholesterol: the good, the bad and the remedy**

### **We hear it mentioned often, but what exactly is cholesterol?**

Well, it may be a term bandied about in many margarine ads, but few people really understand what cholesterol is, and tend to see it as purely harmful.

In fact, cholesterol is essential for us to function. It is a waxy, oil-based substance found in every cell in our body. It helps create vitamin D, produce hormones and even digest food. We can make our own cholesterol, and it can also be absorbed from food we eat.

Of course, it's only helpful when your cholesterol is at normal levels. It's when our bad cholesterol becomes concentrated in the blood that it can become dangerous, leading to blocked arteries and heart disease.

### **So what are the two types of cholesterol?**

Because cholesterol is oil-based it does not mix with our blood, which is water-based. So it's transferred around the body by lipoproteins. Two types of lipoproteins carry our cholesterol:

1. **Low-density lipoprotein** (LDL): cholesterol carried by these lipoproteins is known as the 'bad cholesterol'.
2. **High-density lipoprotein** (HDL): cholesterol carried by these lipoproteins is known as the 'good cholesterol'.

However, you do need healthy amounts of **both types** of cholesterol. But if your LDL cholesterol is too high, it causes blocked arteries (the vessels that carry blood away from the heart) which can lead to heart attacks or strokes.

HDL cholesterol is seen as good because it carries cholesterol from the body to the liver, which gets rid of it from your body.

### What is high cholesterol, and why is it risky?

High cholesterol is when you have too much cholesterol in your blood. It usually has no signs or symptoms, which is why it is called the silent killer.

High cholesterol levels can cause plaque to build up in the arteries, narrowing them and increasing the chance of blood clots. This can lead to heart attacks and strokes.

### Testing your cholesterol is a healthcare priority!

Because high cholesterol doesn't cause any symptoms, the only way to know for sure is to go have a blood test done at your doctor or at a clinic every year.

If you have a family history of high cholesterol or heart disease, it's recommended you go every six months.

Speak with your doctor, but usually it's best to fast (i.e. have no food or drink) for 9 hours before the test to obtain the most accurate results.

Most tests will measure your LDL and your HDL cholesterol levels. You should aim for a higher HDL level than an LDL level.

These are the normal boundaries below, but speak to your doctor if you have a history of high cholesterol or heart disease because then your targets may be very different:

<b>Lipid Levels</b>	<b>mmol/l</b>
Total cholesterol	< 5.0
LDL cholesterol	< 3.0
HDL cholesterol (women)	> 1.2
HDL cholesterol (men)	> 1.0
Triglycerides	< 1.7

### What causes high cholesterol?

A number of factors play a role, including:

- **Genetics:** if you have a family history of high cholesterol it's likely you may too
- **Diet:** eating too much saturated fat and foods containing cholesterol
- **Weight:** being overweight increases your risk of a heart attack, and your levels of cholesterol
- **Lack of exercise:** this also increases your risk of heart disease
- **Age:** generally, cholesterol increases as we get older
- **Smoking**



- **Diabetes**
- **High blood pressure**

### Treatment for high cholesterol

Diet and exercise are usually first to be prescribed by a doctor. In some cases, they may also prescribe chronic medication to help control your cholesterol levels.

Statins are the most prescribed drugs to help lower cholesterol. Even if you given medication, you will still need to adopt a healthier lifestyle so that you can stay on a lower dose and avoid side effects.

### So how can I help manage and prevent high cholesterol?

- **Diet:** begin to eat more healthily by reducing how much fat you eat. Saturated fats increase your cholesterol and are found in processed foods like fast food, biscuits, pies and chips.

Rather eat healthy fats like seed or avocado oil, and a lot of oily fish that contain Omega-3 like salmon, mackerel, pilchards and sardines.

Eat more high-fibre fruits and vegetables. Eat sugar sparingly.

- **Exercise:** at least for 30 minutes, five times a week as it increases your levels of good HDL cholesterol.
- **Weight:** losing weight if you are overweight helps lower your LDL cholesterol levels.
- **Quit smoking** and try avoid second-hand smoke.
- **Alcohol in moderation.**

Remember, cholesterol tests are one of the most important check-ups you can do for your health. If it's already been a year, or you've never been, contact your doctor or local clinic now to book yours.