

Cholesterol

When should I have screening tests for cholesterol?

The National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute (NHLBI) recommends every five years starting at age 20 for those at average risk. Patients with certain high-risk conditions (e.g. diabetes, previous heart attack) should be tested every year.

How high is too high?

Total cholesterol should be less than 200. Normally, the total cholesterol is broken down into its components to further determine risk.

In general, it is best if **triglycerides** are less than 150, **HDL cholesterol** is more than 40 and **LDL cholesterol** is less than 100.

What are triglycerides?

Triglycerides are the “fat” in the blood and are very dependent on diet. High triglycerides are a risk factor for heart disease even if cholesterol is normal

What is the difference between HDL cholesterol and LDL cholesterol?

- **HDL** – “High Density Lipoprotein”. This cholesterol particle is good for you. It helps remove cholesterol from plaques inside of arteries. It is not highly affected by diet but does go up with exercise and weight loss.
- **LDL** – “Low Density Lipoprotein”. This cholesterol particle is a more significant risk factor for heart disease than triglycerides or HDL cholesterol. Desired levels vary based on risk of heart disease.

If your risk of heart disease is...	...your LDL should be less than...
Average	160
Above average	130
High	100

To find out what your risk of heart disease is and what your LDL ought to be, ask your primary care provider.

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How can I lower my cholesterol?

- **Low Fat Diet** – Obtain a diet plan from your provider that contains less than 7% of total calories from saturated fat and less than 200 mg of cholesterol per day. Avoid trans fats altogether.
- **Viscous soluble fiber** – Most fiber we get is *insoluble*, but it is *soluble* fiber that helps lower cholesterol. The goal is at least 5-10 grams of viscous soluble fiber daily. To get that much, eat more fruits, beans, oatmeal and high-fiber grains. Consider taking a psyllium fiber supplement (e.g. Metamucil). Fiber slows down the absorption of cholesterol so your liver can handle it more effectively. Try taking a dose of fiber supplement before each meal.
- **Plant stanols and sterols** – These natural substances reduce cholesterol. They are currently available in the US as Benecol and other margarines and as supplements. The dose is 2 grams a day.
- **Exercise** – Walking 30 minutes every day helps lower LDL and triglycerides and raises HDL. It also makes your heart more fit, lowers blood pressure and helps with weight loss!
- **Supplements – Fish oil supplements** contain eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA). At high doses (5 to 12 grams per day) they can lower triglycerides significantly. **Soy protein** at 25 to 75 g per day can lower LDL cholesterol modestly (3-20%). **Policosanol** can lower cholesterol but little is know about its safety – stay tuned for more information later. **Red Yeast Rice** blocks an enzyme in the liver the same way prescription medications called “statins” do. Don’t mix it with statins.
- **Medication** – There are several effective and safe medications available for patients who do not successfully lower their cholesterol with the above measures. Ask your provider which one is right for you.

For more information contact:

The National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute

www.nhlbi.nih.gov

American Heart Association

www.americanheart.org

American Academy of Family Physicians

www.familydoctor.org