

High Cholesterol Affects 1 in 3 Americans – What Can You Do to Control Your Levels?

Nearly 1 in 3 American adults has high cholesterol. Too much cholesterol puts you at risk for heart disease and stroke, two leading causes of death in the United States. High cholesterol has no signs or



symptoms, so the only way to know if you have it is to get your cholesterol checked (e.g. complete your free annual wellness screening). This month, WellPATH provides healthful information about cholesterol and how you can manage your cholesterol levels and lower your risk.

What Is Cholesterol?

Cholesterol is a waxy, fat-like substance developed by the liver that lives in your bloodstream to make the new cells your body needs. But some people have too much cholesterol in their bloodstream. This can cause a serious problem, such as heart attack or stroke, if it is not managed.

Low-Density Lipoprotein (LDL)

There are two types of blood cholesterol. Low-density lipoprotein (LDL) is the “bad” kind of cholesterol. One way to remember this is to think of the “L” as “low,” in that you want to keep this kind of cholesterol low. This kind of cholesterol can build up on the insides of your artery walls, creating a thick, hard substance called plaque.

High Density Lipoprotein (HDL)

The “good” kind of cholesterol is known as high-density lipoprotein (HDL). A good way to remember this is to think of the “H” in “high,” as in the type of cholesterol you want to

keep high. HDL “good” cholesterol helps your body remove the LDL “bad” cholesterol from your bloodstream.

Triglycerides

Triglycerides are the most common type of fat in your body. They come from food and your body also makes them. They, too, can build up on the insides of your artery walls and cause plaque.

High Cholesterol Dangers

When you have too much LDL “bad” cholesterol in your blood, it can join with fats and other substances to build up plaque in the inner walls of your arteries. The arteries can become clogged and narrow, which reduces the flow of your blood. If this buildup of plaque breaks loose or ruptures, a blood clot may form at this location or break off and travel in your bloodstream. When this occurs, the blood clot can block the flow of blood to your heart, causing a heart attack. If the blood clot travels to your brain and blocks an artery leading to or in your brain, it can cause a stroke.

What Should My Total Cholesterol Be?

In the past, treatment guidelines directed health care providers to focus on treating their patients to target goal levels for total cholesterol, HDL “good”, LDL “bad”, and triglycerides. According to the American Heart Association, however, current prevention guidelines recommend an approach that goes beyond cholesterol levels alone and considers overall risk assessment and reduction of modifiable risk factors such as diet, activity and smoking. It is still very important to know your numbers, but work with your health care provider to modify your risk factors.

What Causes High Cholesterol?

Your cholesterol can depend on several factors, including your lifestyle, genetics, family history and medical conditions. The body makes cholesterol naturally and a normal level of cholesterol is necessary for good health. Many people get extra cholesterol from the foods they eat, especially from meats and full-fat dairy products. This is called dietary cholesterol. High cholesterol levels can also result from your genetic background. If one or both parents have high cholesterol, it's likely that you will too.

Another common cause of high cholesterol is a hectic and unhealthy lifestyle. Being physically inactive, smoking, and being overweight or obese are risk factors for unhealthy cholesterol levels as well.

Risk Factors for High Cholesterol That Can Be Managed

- **Diet:** Eating foods that are high in saturated or trans fats can increase your LDL “bad” cholesterol.
- **Overweight and Obesity:** Carrying too much weight can raise your LDL “bad” and triglyceride levels.
- **Smoking:** Tobacco smoke also raises your triglyceride levels and lowers your HDL “good” levels.
- **Physical Activity:** Not getting enough physical activity can contribute to being overweight or obese. Staying active can help you lose weight and lowers your LDL “bad” levels.

Risk Factors for High Cholesterol That You Cannot Change

- **Genes:** You can genetically inherit high LDL “bad” and triglyceride levels from your parents or grandparents.
- **Age:** As people age, they are more likely to have higher levels of cholesterol.

How to Lower Cholesterol

If you have high cholesterol, your doctor may recommend lifestyle changes to help lower it. For instance, they may recommend changes to your diet, exercise habits, or other aspects of your daily routine. If you smoke tobacco products, they will likely advise you to quit. Your doctor may also prescribe medications or other treatments to help lower your cholesterol levels. In some cases, they may refer you to a specialist for more care.

Eat a Heart-Healthy Diet

The best way to lower your cholesterol numbers is to cut the amount of saturated fat in your diet. Limit saturated fats as much as possible. Avoid trans fats completely.

Here are some additional healthy-eating tips:

- Get plenty of fruits and multi-colored vegetables into your diet.

- Include whole grains in your diet.
- Limit sugary foods and beverages.
- Watch your daily sodium intake. Check food labels for sodium amount per serving.

Your health care provider and WellPATH are available to help you reach your health goals, including keeping your cholesterol at healthy levels. Make sure you know your cholesterol numbers and work with a professional to develop a healthy and sustainable plan that works for you!