

## Cholesterol is Not All Bad

Cholesterol gets a bad rap, but the truth is, we **need** cholesterol for our body to function properly. Cholesterol levels are an important measure of heart health. Yet, this is not your



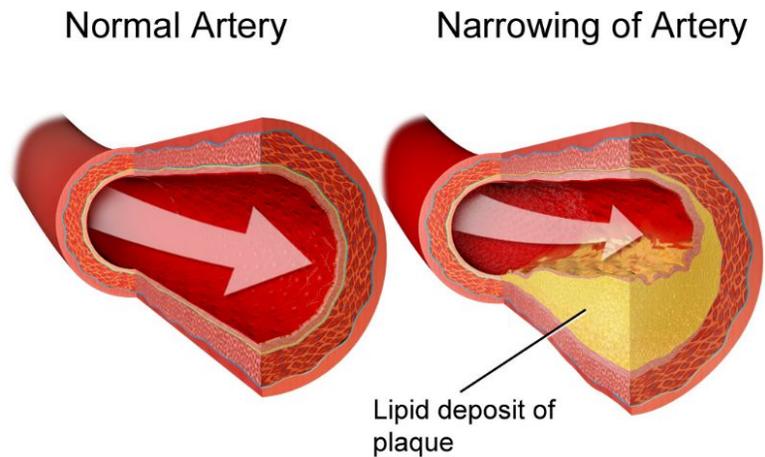
average cholesterol article where we tell you all the components of cholesterol and what is considered high cholesterol. Instead, this month we want to help you understand why cholesterol is **so** important for your health, debunk some common myths about cholesterol, and provide you with ways to boost your good cholesterol.

### Quick Review of the Different Components of Cholesterol

- **Low-density lipoproteins (LDL):** LDL Cholesterol is what some people call “bad” cholesterol. This type makes up most of your body’s cholesterol and is not necessarily bad unless you have high levels of it, or not enough HDL cholesterol to help carry it back to the liver.
- **High-density lipoprotein (HDL):** HDL Cholesterol is what people refer to as “good” cholesterol. It’s like a vacuum cleaner for cholesterol in the body. This type carries cholesterol back to the liver to be flushed from your body.
- **Triglycerides:** Triglycerides are a type of fat (lipid) found in your blood. When you eat, your body converts any calories it doesn't need to use right away into triglycerides. The triglycerides are stored in your fat cells. Later, hormones release triglycerides for energy between meals. If you regularly eat more calories than you burn, particularly from high-carbohydrate foods, you may have a high amount of triglycerides stored in your body.

## Why is Cholesterol Important?

Some types of cholesterol are essential for our bodies to operate well. Cholesterol plays a role in making hormones and building cells. It is also an important building block in cell membranes, and though we measure cholesterol production in the blood, it is found in all of the cells in your body!



Additionally, cholesterol is essential in making Vitamin D (don't get us started on how important Vitamin D is for the body), as well as estrogen and testosterone. It is also essential in the production of fat-dissolving bile acids (used in digestion). HDL carries cholesterol back to the liver, where the liver then flushes it from the body. While high levels of LDL cholesterol can cause heart disease or stroke, HDL can actually lower your risk. So, you can see how if you have a proper balance of the two and the two types are working together to create a balance that cholesterol may not actually be so bad!

Having the right amount of HDL to carry the LDL back to the liver is the goal. But, if your LDL is very high and HDL is low (or even at a normal level) there is not a balance of the two types and the LDL can be deposited in your arteries and form plaque on the walls of your arteries. This makes the artery narrower, increasing your blood pressure and increasing the load on your heart muscle. There also becomes a risk of some of the plaque "breaking off" of your artery wall and traveling to your heart, lungs, or brain, all of which are life-threatening.

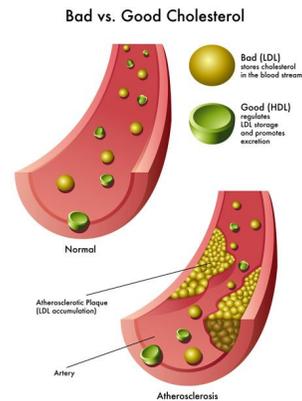
## Myths About Cholesterol

### 1. I would be able to feel if I had high cholesterol, after all isn't my heart working

**harder?** High cholesterol usually does not have signs/symptoms until the damage is done such as with a heart attack or stroke. This is why it is SO important to get your cholesterol levels checked **at least** every 5 years. (**Pro tip:** WellPATH sponsors **FREE** Wellness Screenings, which includes cholesterol checks, throughout the year at

various District sites. Check out [www.JHMBHealthConnect.com/know-your-numbers](http://www.JHMBHealthConnect.com/know-your-numbers) for more info).

- 2. High cholesterol is a result of a poor diet.** This can be true but is not always the case! Did you know that only about 20% of the cholesterol in your bloodstream comes from the food you eat?



Your body actually makes the rest. You may not know that some people that you consider have the healthiest habits may have high cholesterol due to a genetic predisposition.

- 3. Eating foods with a lot of cholesterol will not make my cholesterol go up.** This one can be a bit confusing. Most foods with a lot of cholesterol usually also have high amounts of saturated fats (think red meat, cheese, and butter). However, there are some cholesterol foods when eaten in the correct moderation that don't necessarily raise your cholesterol (think avocados, good olive oil, and nuts) that have healthy unsaturated fats.
- 4. I can't do anything to change my cholesterol levels.** There are MANY things you can do to help improve your cholesterol levels and keep them in a healthy range. The biggest ones are:
- Be active every day
  - Make healthy food choices
  - If you smoke/use tobacco products, find a way to quit
  - Talk with your Primary Care Physician
  - Know your family history and get tested at least every 5 years

### How Do I Boost Good Cholesterol?

The things to boost your HDL cholesterol are not actually food. HDL is actually affected by medical and environmental factors. Prevention and avoidance of several of these

factors are key. Things that should be prevented and avoided include:

- Obesity
- A sedentary lifestyle
- Type 2 diabetes
- Inflammation
- Smoking

**It is important to understand that itself cholesterol is not bad, but excess cholesterol in the bloodstream is bad. Nearly 40% of American adults have high cholesterol.**

There are some hormones such as estrogen and thyroid hormone that can increase your HDL concentrations. But the biggest thing you have more immediate control over is exercise! Exercise can be done in your home, at the gym, on break at work, with your kids at the park, and contrary to a lot of beliefs it can be done on vacation! You just have to choose to start!

If you are not sure where to start, WellPATH sponsors **FREE** in-person or virtual group [fitness classes](#). We recommend you start by attending a Know Your Numbers Wellness Clinic and getting your numbers checked. If you fall in a moderate or high risk level, WellPATH actually offers [Personal Training and Wellness Coaching Program](#) to help



you make healthy changes. If you do not fall in a moderate or high risk category with your wellness screening, we still suggest you remain proactive in prevention by taking advantage of our FREE [Wellness Challenges](#) (prizes are given out at the end!), as well as the group fitness classes mentioned above.

Taking part in preventive health is a part of advocating for yourself in healthcare. It is so much easier to prevent illness than it is to try and reverse it after the damage is done.

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**Sources:**

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