

Your Wellness Matters

Cholesterol



According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 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.

What is cholesterol?

Cholesterol is a waxy substance found in fats in your blood, which your body needs to function. Cholesterol travels through the blood on proteins called lipoproteins. There are two types of lipoproteins:

- LDL (low-density lipoprotein)—known as bad cholesterol—makes up most of your body's cholesterol. High levels of LDL cholesterol can increase your risk for heart disease and stroke.
- HDL (high-density lipoprotein)—known as good cholesterol—absorbs cholesterol and carries it back to the liver, where it's flushed from the body. High levels of HDL cholesterol can lower your risk for heart disease and stroke.

When your body has too much LDL cholesterol, it can build up on the walls of your blood vessels. As your blood vessels build up plaque over time, the insides of the vessels narrow, blocking blood flow to and from your heart and other organs. When blood flow to the heart is blocked, it can cause chest pain or a heart attack.

How prevalent is high cholesterol?

Children, young adults and older adults can all have high cholesterol. According to the CDC, nearly 95 million American adults have high cholesterol levels. Additionally, 7% of American children have high total cholesterol.

What causes high cholesterol?

An unhealthy diet high in carbohydrates, saturated fats and trans fats is unhealthy because it tends to raise bad cholesterol levels. Additionally, your levels can be elevated by health conditions and behaviors, including:

- Obesity
- Type 2 diabetes
- Physical inactivity
- Smoking
- Excess alcohol consumption
- Family history of high cholesterol

Everyone's risk for high cholesterol goes up with age, as the body can't clear cholesterol as well as it used to when younger.

How can you address high cholesterol?

High cholesterol usually has no signs or symptoms, so it's important to get your LDL and HDL cholesterol levels checked by a doctor. The American Heart Association recommends that all adults ages 20 or older should have their cholesterol checked every four to six years.

The cholesterol screening requires a simple blood draw paired with fasting prior to the test. Depending on your screening results, talk to your doctor about ways to lower your risk including:

- Lifestyle changes
- Diet changes
- Cholesterol-lowering medicine

Where can I learn more?

With no warning signs, many people are unaware of the condition until it worsens. For more information about cholesterol, please contact your doctor to evaluate your health risks.