

What Does High Cholesterol Mean?

Cholesterol is a waxy, fat-like substance that your body needs for many important functions, such as producing new cells and substances that help you digest foods. Your bloodstream transports cholesterol in small packages called lipoproteins (lip-o-PRO-teens). Two kinds of lipoproteins carry cholesterol throughout your body. Low density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol is sometimes called "bad" cholesterol and high density lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol is sometimes called "good" cholesterol. It is important to have healthy levels of both.

High LDL cholesterol leads to a cholesterol buildup in the arteries. The higher the LDL level in your blood, the greater chance you have for getting heart disease.

HDL carries cholesterol from other parts of your body back to your liver. The liver removes the cholesterol from your body. The higher your HDL cholesterol level, the lower your chance of getting heart disease.

Too much cholesterol in your blood can build up in the walls of your arteries (blood vessels that carry blood from the heart to other parts of the body). This cholesterol buildup is called plaque. Over time, plaque can cause narrowing of the arteries. This is called atherosclerosis (ath-er-o-skler-O-sis), or "hardening of the arteries."

Special arteries, called coronary arteries, bring blood to the heart. Narrowing of your coronary arteries due to plaque can stop or slow down the blood flow to your heart. When the arteries narrow,

the amount of oxygen-carrying blood is decreased. This is called coronary artery disease (CAD). Large plaque areas can lead to chest pain called angina. Angina happens when the heart does not receive enough blood and the oxygen it carries. Angina is a common sign of CAD.

Some plaques have a thin covering and burst (rupture), releasing fat and cholesterol into the bloodstream. The release of fat and cholesterol may cause your blood to clot. A clot can block the flow of blood. This blockage can cause angina or a heart attack.

High LDL Causes

A variety of things can affect the cholesterol levels in your blood.

DIET

Saturated fat raises your LDL cholesterol level more than anything else in your diet. Trans fatty acids (trans fats) are made when vegetable oil is "hydrogenated" to harden it. Trans fatty acids also raise cholesterol levels. Cholesterol is found in foods that come from animal sources, for example, egg yolks, meat, and cheese.

WEIGHT

Being overweight tends to increase your LDL level, lower your HDL level, and increase your total cholesterol level.

ACTIVITY

Lack of regular exercise can lead to weight gain and raise your LDL cholesterol level. Regular exercise can help you lose weight and lower your LDL level. It can also help you raise your HDL level.

HEREDITY

High blood cholesterol can run in families.

AGE AND SEX

Starting at puberty, men have lower levels of HDL than women. As women and men get older, their LDL cholesterol levels rise.

Treatment Drugs

STATINS

Statins block the production of cholesterol in the liver itself. They lower LDL, the "bad" cholesterol, and triglycerides and have a mild effect in raising HDL, the "good" cholesterol.

NIACIN

Niacin is a B-complex vitamin. It's found in food, but is also available at high doses by prescription. It lowers LDL cholesterol and raises HDL cholesterol.

BILE ACID RESINS

These drugs work inside the intestine, where they bind to bile and prevent it from being reabsorbed into the circulatory system. Bile is made largely from cholesterol, so these drugs work by depleting the body's supply of cholesterol.

FIBRATES

Fibrates reduce the production of triglycerides and can increase HDL cholesterol. It's important when taking cholesterol medications to follow your community pharmacist's recommendations carefully. □

Ask Your Family Pharmacist®