Numbers to Know: Cholesterol

CHOLESTEROL, A WAXY SUBSTANCE FOUND IN THE BLOOD, IS NECESSARY FOR GOOD HEALTH BUT SOME PEOPLE HAVE TOO MUCH. AS YOUR CHOLESTEROL INCREASES, SO DOES YOUR RISK FOR HEART ATTACKS, STROKES, AND OTHER HEALTH PROBLEMS.

There are a few different numbers on my cholesterol report.

What do they mean?

Your total cholesterol number consists of these 3 groups:

- **LDL** is the “bad” cholesterol that you should be most concerned about. This clogs the arteries and raises your risk for life-threatening health problems.
  - The “L” in LDL can remind us that it is Lousy and we want to keep it Low
- **HDL** is the “good” cholesterol that you want to have more of. This acts like a vacuum cleaner in your arteries and carries away the bad cholesterol. HDL helps to lower your risk for heart attacks and strokes.
  - The “H” in HDL reminds us that it keeps us Healthy and Happy, and we want it to be High.
- **Non-HDL cholesterol** includes all of the other harmful types of cholesterol.

**Triglycerides** are a kind of fat that, when elevated, also increase your risk for heart attack, stroke, and other conditions. These are not part of the total cholesterol number but are often measured at the same time.

What should my numbers be?

Different people have different goals based on their health status. In general, a person without diabetes, heart disease, or multiple other risk factors* should aim for the following target numbers:

- **Total cholesterol**—below 200
- **LDL**—below 130 (lower is even better)
- **HDL**—60 or higher
- **Non-HDL**—below 160
- **Triglycerides**—below 150

What can I do to have normal cholesterol levels?

- **Focus on a healthy weight.** If you are at a healthy weight, stay there! If you are not, set a goal to lose 5-10% of your body weight. This small amount can make a big difference in your cholesterol levels.

*other risk factors that could change your target numbers include: cigarette smoking, family history of early heart disease, HDL below 40, high blood pressure, men 45 and older or women 55 and older.

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