

FitFacts[®]



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.

- **Eat a healthy diet low in unhealthy fat and cholesterol.** The main foods to steer clear of include red meat, butter, full-fat dairy, fried foods, and baked goods. [see Fit Fact “[DASH Diet](#)” and “[Mediterranean Diet](#)” for examples of healthy diets]
- **Get active.** Aim to be physically active for 150 minutes each week. If you are not active right now, don’t let this intimidate you. Simply start with a smaller goal and gradually increase the time and intensity of your activity. And make sure to choose an activity that you enjoy. A brisk walk with a friend is an excellent way to get started. [see Fit Fact “[Starting an Exercise Program](#)” and “[Small Steps to Increase Physical Activity](#)”]
- **Meet with your health care provider** to discuss your target cholesterol levels. Some people, no matter how healthy their lifestyle, still need additional medical therapy in order to lower their cholesterol levels.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[American Council on Exercise](#)

National Cholesterol Education Program. *Third report of the expert panel on detection, evaluation, and treatment of high blood cholesterol in adults.* NIH Pub. No. 02-5215. Bethesda, MD: National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, 2002.

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