

## Cholesterol—The Good, The Bad And The Ugly

Cholesterol. A Day doesn't go by without coming in contact with it. We read about cholesterol, hear about it, talk about it, eat it, and our bodies make it. The mere idea of cholesterol can seem like a n ominous black cloud—it's called the silent killer. It's something in our blood that we can't feel, but that can damage our arteries and heart. High levels of LDL—cholesterol—the kind that contributes to clogged arteries—are directly related to heart disease, the number one killer of Americans. More than half of all American adults have an elevated LDL-cholesterol.

Knowledge is the key when it comes to cholesterol. You should know what cholesterol is, what it does, what your levels are and how to maintain healthy cholesterol levels. "Patients should work with their doctors to monitor their cholesterol and do all they can to get it under control," says AvMed medical director Marc Rivo, M.D. "We see impressive results when patients take an active role in controlling their cholesterol levels through lifestyle changes alone or combined with medication."

**What is Cholesterol?** Cholesterol is a fat-like substance found in the bloodstream and cells. It is both made by the body and eaten in food. When you have too much cholesterol, it builds up in your arteries, eventually narrowing them and restricting blood flow to the heart.

A high total cholesterol count has no symptoms, which is why you need to have it measured by your doctor regularly—at least every five years from age 20 and beyond. Ask for a "lipoprotein profile," a blood test that measures total cholesterol, LDL (bad) cholesterol, HDL (good) cholesterol and triglycerides. LDL is the main cause of the buildup in arteries, so the higher the LDL number, the greater your risk. HDL helps prevent cholesterol buildup by bringing the blood cholesterol to the liver, where it's eliminated, so a low HDL level indicates an increased risk. If your total cholesterol is 200 or higher or your HDL is less than 40, there is cause for concern.

**Reduce Cholesterol**—Age, weight, gender, heredity, diet and exercise all affect cholesterol levels. While you can't do anything about your age, gender or heredity, you can do a lot about the related factors of weight, diet, exercise and stress.

- **Weight:** Losing weight can help lower overall cholesterol levels.

- **Diet:** Reducing saturated fat and trans fatty acids helps lower cholesterol levels. Avoid fried foods, especially at restaurants. Reduce highly refined carbohydrates; they have been shown to contribute to high LDL cholesterol levels.

- **Exercise:** Experts recommend 30 minutes of physical activity each day to help lower LDL and raise HDL cholesterol levels in your body.

### Medication

When lifestyle changes alone don't lower cholesterol enough, or if your levels are too high to rely solely on lifestyle changes, there are several cholesterol-lowering drugs that, together with lifestyle changes, can be extremely effective.

*It's easy to take a "wait and see" approach if you are not sure if you are dealing with an emergency. However, it's really not a good idea to self-diagnose and then hope a situation will get better. Call AvMed's Nurse On Call 24-hour telephone line at 1-888-866-5432. You can speak confidentially with a registered nurse about any health concern.*

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