

How Do My Cholesterol Levels Affect My Risk of Heart Attack and Stroke?

High cholesterol can increase your risk of heart attack and stroke. If you're 20 or older, you should have your traditional risk factors (including cholesterol) checked every four to six years. If certain factors put you at risk, or you already have heart disease, your doctor may ask you to check it more often.



What should my cholesterol levels be?

You should look beyond cholesterol levels alone. The best approach considers overall risk assessment and reduction.

It's important to know your numbers and work with your doctor to treat your risk. They will assess your risk factors to choose the best treatment options.

- If you're between 40 and 75, ask your doctor to assess your 10-year risk.
- If you're between 20 and 39, priority would be to get an estimate of lifetime risk. If your risk is high, lifestyle and statin medication may help manage it.

If your risk remains uncertain, or treatment options are unclear, your doctor may do a coronary artery calcium (CAC) test. This provides greater insight into your risk and helps in decision-making.

You can check your risk with our [Check. Change. Control. Calculator™](#). In minutes, you'll learn your risk for a heart attack or stroke.

How will I know my numbers?

Your doctor will do a blood test to measure your cholesterol levels. This may be a "fasting" or "non-fasting lipoprotein profile." It assesses several types of fat in the blood. It's measured in milligrams per deciliter (mg/dL).

The test gives you four results: total cholesterol, HDL (good) cholesterol, LDL (bad) cholesterol and triglycerides (blood fats).

What is HDL cholesterol?

HDL cholesterol is called "good" cholesterol. A healthy HDL-cholesterol level may protect against heart attack and stroke.

HDL takes cholesterol away from your arteries and back to the liver. There, it's processed so that excess can be removed from your body. HDL may also remove cholesterol from plaque in the arteries.

What is LDL cholesterol?

LDL cholesterol is known as "bad" cholesterol. The body's tissues use some of this cholesterol to build cells. But too much of it can cause fatty buildups inside your arteries.

Together with other substances, it can form **plaque** (a thick, hard, fatty deposit). Plaque narrows the arteries and reduces blood flow. This is called **atherosclerosis**. If the buildup of plaque ruptures, a blood clot may form at this location or a piece may break off and travel in the bloodstream, causing a heart attack or stroke.

With LDL, lower is better to reduce heart attack and stroke risk in people who are at high risk.

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What are triglycerides?

Triglycerides are the most common type of fat in your body. They come from food, and your body also makes them. They store excess energy from your diet.

A high triglyceride level combined with high LDL (bad) cholesterol or low HDL (good) cholesterol is linked with fatty buildups within the artery walls. This increases the risk of heart attack and stroke.

Should I track my numbers?

Use the chart below to track your results each time you have a test. Discuss these numbers and your other risk factors and how they affect your overall risk with your doctor.



	1st Visit	2nd Visit	3rd Visit	4th Visit
Total Blood Cholesterol				
LDL (bad) Cholesterol				
HDL (good) Cholesterol				
Triglycerides				

HOW CAN I LEARN MORE?

- 1 Call 1-800-AHA-USA1 (1-800-242-8721), or visit heart.org to learn more about heart disease and stroke.
- 2 Sign up for our monthly *Heart Insight* e-news for heart patients and their families, at HeartInsight.org.
- 3 Connect with others sharing similar journeys with heart disease and stroke by joining our Support Network at heart.org/SupportNetwork.

Do you have questions for your doctor or nurse?

Take a few minutes to write down your questions for the next time you see your health care professional.

For example:

How can I reduce my cholesterol?

How often should I have my cholesterol checked?

MY QUESTIONS:

We have many other fact sheets to help you make healthier choices to reduce your risk, manage your condition or care for a loved one. Visit heart.org/AnswersByHeart to learn more.