

High Cholesterol (Hyperlipidemia): The Facts

What Is High Cholesterol?

- High cholesterol is an abnormally high level of total cholesterol in the blood. High cholesterol often involves a concerning imbalance between low-density lipoprotein cholesterol or LDL-C—considered the “bad cholesterol”—and high-density lipoprotein cholesterol or HDL-C, which is referred to as “good cholesterol.”
- The average LDL-C level for American adults age 20 and older is 115 mg/dL. For many people, LDL-C levels of 130-159 mg/dL are considered borderline high, and levels of 160-189 mg/dL are classified as high. However, the classification of high LDL-C levels may vary, depending on each individual’s risk of heart attack or stroke.
- The body uses cholesterol to build cell walls and produce hormones and vitamin D, but overproduction—particularly of LDL-C—increases the risk of cardiovascular disease.
- When cholesterol rises to abnormal levels, it collects on the walls of arteries, narrowing the openings in these important vessels, restricting proper blood flow and potentially causing heart attacks and strokes.
- It is important to be aware of your family’s history of high cholesterol, because U.S. studies have shown that 50% of the variance in cholesterol is genetically determined.
- Many factors can contribute to high cholesterol, including obesity, lack of exercise and a diet rich in saturated fat.

How Is High Cholesterol Diagnosed?

- High cholesterol is considered a silent condition because it has no symptoms. It can only be diagnosed with a blood test called a lipid profile. This test measures cholesterol in milligrams per deciliter of blood—or mg/dL. Too much cholesterol can significantly increase the risk of heart disease or stroke.
- A total cholesterol reading of less than 200 mg/dL is considered healthy. An amount between 200-240 mg/dL is deemed “borderline high risk” and levels over 240 mg/dL “high risk.”
- Tests also distinguish between types of cholesterol, including LDL-C—the “bad” type—and HDL-C—the “good” type.” LDL-C carries cholesterol to the blood vessels supplying the tissues where it can build up in artery walls, while HDL-C removes bad cholesterol from the arteries.

- For most people, the LDL-C level should be less than 100 mg/dL. For someone who has had a heart attack or stroke, the LDL-C goal may be less than 70 mg/dl.

How Common is High Cholesterol?

- Approximately 71 million people have high cholesterol in the U.S.
- Regardless of age or ethnicity, women (16.9%) are more likely to have high cholesterol than men (15.6%), although men suffer from its cardiovascular complications ten years earlier than women.
- White females are most likely to experience high cholesterol with a rate nearing 18%.
- The risk of high cholesterol increases with age. Among people who are 65 years of age or older, approximately 40% have high LDL-C levels—more than triple the amount of people in their 20s and 30s. For women, the risk of heightened LDL-C levels increases significantly after menopause.

How is High Cholesterol Treated?

- Lifestyle changes are the initial step, including a low-fat diet, increased exercise, weight loss and smoking cessation.
- If lifestyle adjustments fail, medication is often prescribed. Over-the-counter dietary fiber supplements may help lower cholesterol. Prescription treatments are also available, including niacin (a B vitamin) and statins, which are the most commonly prescribed medications to treat high cholesterol. Statins block an enzyme the liver uses to produce cholesterol.
- Approximately one in four Americans age 45 and older are taking a statin. However, studies have shown that nearly 75% of patients discontinue their therapy by the end of the first year. As a result, many are not reaching their cholesterol goals.
- As with all medications, there are important safety considerations with the use of statins. Prior to starting on statin therapy, it is important for patients to discuss their medical history including medical conditions and medications with their health care provider. Patients should also talk to their doctor about any issues they may experience that may be related to their treatment.
- In addition, as with most drugs, some statins may interact with other drugs. If your doctor recommends a statin, tell your doctor about any other medications you take.