

Cholesterol

What is cholesterol?

Cholesterol is a fatty, waxy substance that is mainly produced by our liver. Too much saturated fat in our diet contributes to high blood cholesterol. Most saturated fats come from the animal products we eat, such as butter, whole milk, cheese, pies, pastries and cakes, as well as potatoes and kumara with butter added eg. hot chips, hash browns.

Apart from too much saturated fat in our diet, high blood cholesterol levels can also be due to a genetic (inherited) disorder.

Whatever the cause of your high cholesterol, it is important to lower your levels through lifestyle changes and possibly medication.

What does cholesterol do?

Cholesterol is important as it helps our bodies function properly. However, if there is too much cholesterol in your blood, it will build up in your artery walls, causing narrowing of the arteries. This increases your risk of developing heart disease or having a stroke.

Cholesterol and other fats are called lipids. There are different types of lipids within our body. Each has a different function:

High Density Lipoprotein cholesterol (HDL) is often called the ‘good’ cholesterol because it helps remove cholesterol from the artery walls reducing your risk of heart disease.

Low-Density Lipoprotein cholesterol (LDL) is often called the ‘bad’ cholesterol because it deposits cholesterol into the artery walls increasing your risk of heart disease.

Triglycerides are the most common form of fat in our body. They are a storage form of energy for the body. High triglyceride levels are associated with many diseases, including heart disease and stroke.

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How do I know if my blood cholesterol is too high?

A fasting blood test will determine your lipid profile. An ideal profile is:

Total cholesterol (TC)	Less than 4 mmol/L *
LDL cholesterol	Less than 2.5 mmol/L *
HDL cholesterol	Greater than 1 mmol/L
TC/HDL ratio	Less than 4.5
Triglycerides	Less than 1.7 mmol/L

** If you have had venous coronary artery bypass grafting (CABG), then your total cholesterol should be less than 3.5 mmol/L and LDL Cholesterol less than 2.0 mmol/L.*

Your doctor, nurse or health professional should discuss your target cholesterol level with you, taking into account your overall risk of having a heart attack or stroke.

How can I lower my blood cholesterol level?

- ♥ Follow a heart healthy dietary pattern*
- ♥ Lose weight if you are overweight
- ♥ Do moderate physical activity for at least 30 minutes on most days or daily
- ♥ Avoid excessive drinking of alcohol.

You can further reduce your cholesterol by:

- ♥ Having more servings of dried peas (e.g. chickpeas) and beans (e.g. red kidney beans), soy products, oat cereals, whole grains and high-fibre cereals
- ♥ Including sterol-fortified margarine spreads
- ♥ Checking food labels and choosing those that are low in saturated fats
- ♥ **Not** having foods prepared with butter, hydrogenated oil, coconut or palm oil
- ♥ **Not** eating white meat fat, chicken skin or processed meats or chicken.

If your cholesterol level is too high, your doctor may recommend taking medication. **Many people may need medication for life.**

Check ups

If you are taking cholesterol-lowering medication, you should have your cholesterol measured every three months until it is controlled and then every six months.

*Ask your GP, nurse or health professional for an information sheet.