

February is American Heart Month— What to know about High Blood Cholesterol

Why Is Cholesterol Important?

High blood cholesterol is a major risk factor for heart disease. In fact, the higher your blood cholesterol, the greater your risk of heart disease or heart attack. Heart disease is the #1 killer of men and women in the U.S. States. Each year, more than a million Americans have a heart attack, and about half a million die of heart disease.

How Does Cholesterol Cause Heart Disease?

When there is too much cholesterol (a fat-like substance) in your blood, it builds up in the walls of your arteries. Over time, this buildup causes "hardening of the arteries" so that arteries become narrowed and blood flow to the heart becomes slowed down or blocked. This may cause chest pain or even a heart attack.

High blood cholesterol does not cause symptoms, so many people are unaware when their cholesterol is too high. It is important to find out your cholesterol numbers. Lowering levels that are too high lessens the risk of developing heart disease or dying from it if you already have it.

What Do Cholesterol Numbers Mean?

Getting a blood test called a fasting lipoprotein profile will give information about your:

- **Total Cholesterol**—It is desirable to have a measurement of less than 200 mg/dL.*
- **Low-density lipoprotein (LDL, or "bad" cholesterol)** is the main source of cholesterol buildup and blockage in the arteries. It is optimal to have an LDL level lower than 100 mg/dL. (The higher your LDL cholesterol level, the greater your chance of getting heart disease.)

- **High-density lipoprotein (HDL, or "good" cholesterol)** helps keep cholesterol from building up in the arteries. An HDL of 60 mg/dL will help lower your risk for heart disease. (The higher your HDL cholesterol level, the lower your chance of getting heart disease.)
- **Triglycerides**- another form of fat in your blood. Levels that are borderline high (150-199 mg/dL) or high (200 mg/dL) may need treatment in some people.

What Affects Cholesterol Levels?

A variety of things can affect cholesterol levels. These are things you can do something about:

- **Diet**—Saturated fat and cholesterol in food may increase your cholesterol level.
- **Weight**— Being overweight tends to increase your cholesterol level.
- **Physical Activity**—Being inactive is a risk factor for heart disease. Regular physical activity can help lower LDL cholesterol and raise HDL cholesterol.

**Cholesterol is measured in milligrams (mg) of cholesterol per deciliter (dL) of blood.*



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