



High Cholesterol

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Cholesterol is a soft fat-like substance produced naturally by our bodies, and it plays an important role in maintaining many biological functions. It is part of all cell membranes, and is found in body tissues, and can be made into various hormones, like testosterone and estrogen.

Cholesterol comes from two sources: the liver and the foods we eat. The liver produces the majority of the cholesterol found in the body. Meat, poultry, fish, egg yolks, and dairy products all contain cholesterol in varying amounts. Fruits, vegetables, grains, nuts, seeds, and many other plant based foods do not contain cholesterol, and in some instances have been shown to decrease cholesterol levels.

Our bodies need cholesterol to function. So what is the problem? Well, the problem is that there are different types of cholesterol in the body; and while we need all of them, it is best to think of them as one good and the other bad. The goal is to improve the good cholesterol and lower the bad cholesterol, thus reducing the risk of heart disease.

When your doctor checks your cholesterol (or lipid profile) there are four main indices that are reviewed: total cholesterol, good cholesterol, bad cholesterol, and ugly cholesterol. The total cholesterol is calculated from the other three using a math formula. Good cholesterol is also known as high density lipoprotein (HDL). HDL actually has relatively little cholesterol in its core. It travels through the bloodstream and carries away the bad cholesterol from the arteries and transports it to the liver where it gets recycled or removed from the body. HDL is the only index on the lipid profile you want to be high. LDL (low density lipoprotein) is bad cholesterol. Its composition is the opposite of HDL. Its core is full of cholesterol, and as it travels in the bloodstream it build up and starts sticking to artery walls. When the artery walls take up LDL it

forms plaques (like the hard yellow stuff on teeth), and this leads to clogs in the arteries. Triglyceride (TG) is the ugly cholesterol, and is a type of fat found in food and body fat. It is carried in the bloodstream as part of lipoproteins. The visible fat on chicken or steak is actually triglyceride. TG is produced by the breakdown of certain sugars in the diet. If you are overweight, your body stores the extra calories consumed in fat cells. Imagine if you had x-ray vision; you could then see that extra fat you carry around on your gut (or other plump parts of your body) really does look like the mushy yellow substance on meat before it is cooked. No wonder TG is called ugly cholesterol! People with high TG and low HDL are especially at high risk for heart disease. Your total cholesterol should be less than 200 mg/dL, TG less than 150 mg/dL, LDL less than 100 mg/dL (or less than 70 if you have suffered a heart attack or stroke in the past), and HDL higher than 40 mg/dL.

There are three main ways to control cholesterol: (1) exercise, (2) diet, and (3) medication. Regular exercise can raise HDL and lower TG. Even moderate activity like walking, gardening, doing yard work, and dancing can be beneficial to your cholesterol levels if done daily. Choosing foods that are low in saturated fats and cholesterol like lean cuts of meat with the fat trimmed off, fish that is naturally high in omega-3 like salmon and mackerel, fresh fruit, peas, beans, and cereal is important. Last but certainly not least, when diet and exercise are not enough, medication is useful for reducing cholesterol. Lipitor, Zocor, Crestor, Vytorin, Tricor, and Niacin are a few of the cholesterol lowering medicines that a doctor may prescribe for you. Most of these medications are metabolized by the liver, so a simple blood test is needed to ensure it is working normally before starting the medication. Be sure to take your medication as directed every day. Most people can achieve good results when following a reasonable plan of diet, exercise, and medication to prevent heart attacks and stroke.

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