

Better Health for Life from  
Lehigh Valley Hospital and Health Network



## Rethinking Cholesterol

*According to the latest research, it's all about lowering your LDL*

So what is a healthy cholesterol level? With each new research study, the experts seem to have a different recommendation. The topic has been all over the news lately, yet in spite of that, 60 million Americans either don't know their cholesterol is high or aren't being treated for it. Are you one of them?

Cholesterol is a waxy, fat-like substance produced by your liver that helps build cell walls and certain hormones. Unfortunately, about 100 million of us have too much of this good thing circulating in our blood—and raising our risk for heart disease and stroke.

Some of the causes of high cholesterol are lifestyle-related, including excess weight, a high-fat diet and inactivity. These you can do something about. Risk factors beyond your control are your age (cholesterol tends to rise with age), gender (women have lower LDLs than men up until menopause) and genes (high cholesterol tends to run in families).

### ■ Getting the full picture

If you know your total cholesterol level, it's a good start but far from the whole story. You need to know the three components that make up your total cholesterol in the blood test known as a lipid profile, says nurse practitioner Lori Neri of Lehigh Valley Hospital and Health Network. They are:

**LDL (low density lipoprotein)** is the "bad" cholesterol that can build up on artery walls and cause blockages. According to the newest guidelines from the National Cholesterol Education Program (NCEP), everyone should aim for an LDL level below 100 mg/dL\*. The more heart disease risk factors you have (including family history, high blood pressure, smoking, obesity) the more critical that becomes. If you have heart disease, diabetes, blockages in your neck or leg arteries, or have had a stroke, Neri says, your LDL level should be below 70 mg/dL.

Regular exercise and a low-fat, high-fiber diet can help reduce LDL cholesterol, but many people need medication as well.

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**HDL (high density lipoprotein)** is the “good” cholesterol that carries excess fats away from the arteries and back to the liver for disposal. Guidelines recommend an HDL level above 40 mg/dL for men and above 50 for women. Several studies show that high HDL helps protect you against heart disease, Neri says.

To raise your HDL, eat a low-fat, high-fiber diet, stop smoking, exercise regularly and keep your weight under control.

**Triglycerides** are another form of fat in the bloodstream that can increase your heart disease risk, especially in combination with low HDL. According to current guidelines, triglyceride levels below 150 mg/dL are normal and above 200 are too high. Triglyceride levels rise after a meal, which is why you need to fast for several hours before your lipid profile.

The same diet, exercise and weight control measures that control LDL and HDL help reduce triglycerides. Neri also recommends cutting alcohol consumption and taking omega-3 fish oil capsules.

### ■ Zeroing in on LDL

The buzz in cholesterol research lately is about LDL—and how low you need to go. “The current excitement revolves around the group of drugs known as statins,” says cardiologist Robert Biggs, D.O., of Lehigh Valley Hospital and Health Network. “Studies have shown that statins in higher doses significantly lower LDL, and subsequent heart attack risk, in people with a history of heart attacks. They also reduce arterial plaque buildup in some patients, with relatively minor side effects.

“What we don’t yet know is how low an LDL level the average person should aim for to prevent heart disease,” he says. “I expect the NCEP will revise its recommendations downward soon.”

Meanwhile, have your cholesterol measured at least every five years after age 20, more often if you have risk factors—and discuss the results carefully with your doctor.

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### ■ One woman's case

*She's age 60 and looks perfectly healthy: exercises regularly, eats right, doesn't smoke, has low blood pressure and no family history of heart disease.*

- About her cholesterol—Despite a good HDL level of 70 mg/dL, her LDL is very high at 170 mg/dL.
- Nurse practitioner Lori Neri says—Her doctor probably will recommend and prescribe a statin medication. Her lifestyle choices are already on track—now, she needs aggressive treatment to reduce her risk for heart disease.

### ■ One man's case

*He's age 40, 30 pounds overweight and out of shape. His father died of a heart attack at age 55. On the plus side, he has low blood pressure.*

- About his cholesterol—His LDL level is borderline high at 130 mg/dL.
- Nurse practitioner Lori Neri says—First, I'd encourage lifestyle changes such as a low-fat diet and regular exercise. His physician probably will recommend a stress test due to his family history. If he's diabetic, he should begin statin therapy to bring his LDL under 100 mg/dL. If he's not diabetic, I'd recheck his cholesterol every six to 12 months and recommend a statin if his LDL exceeds 130 mg/dL.

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