



# Managing Cholesterol: What You Can Do

## What's cholesterol?

Cholesterol is a waxy, fatlike substance. It's essential for many body functions, such as:

- Building cell walls
- Producing hormones
- Maintaining normal brain function

Your body makes cholesterol in the liver and also gets it from the foods you eat. Heart disease and other health problems can develop when there's too much cholesterol in your blood.

## What's wrong with too much cholesterol?

When cholesterol levels in the blood are too high, it can:

- Build up inside the blood vessel walls.
- Make it harder for blood to flow through the vessels to your heart and brain.
- Cause inflammation of the blood vessel walls.

Damaged or blocked blood vessels can lead to a heart attack or stroke.

## What are the main cholesterol types?

**LDL (low-density lipoproteins).** If you have high LDL in your blood, then it's important for you to reduce LDL to a healthy range. High LDL levels can stick to the blood vessel walls and form plaque. Plaque can narrow and clog your arteries (atherosclerosis).

**HDL (high-density lipoproteins).** HDL helps prevent LDL from building up in your arteries. The higher your HDL level in your blood, the better.

**Triglycerides.** These are a type of fat, actually the most common fat in the body. Your body uses calories from food for quick energy. Any extra calories are made into triglycerides and stored in fat cells for later use. High triglyceride levels in the blood can harm the heart and blood vessels.

## Should I get a blood test to check my cholesterol?

Get your cholesterol levels tested at least every 5 years. If you have factors that make you high risk for cardiovascular disease (CVD), it's important to get checked regularly and keep your cholesterol test results within a specific range. Your doctor will talk with you about your target range.

If you're not high risk, cholesterol testing can be part of how your doctor assesses your 10-year CVD risk. The 10-year CVD risk uses several variables to estimate a person's 10-year risk of heart attack or strokes. These include diabetes status, age, ethnicity, blood pressure (BP), cholesterol, and smoking status. Talk with your doctor to understand your 10-year CVD risk. Managing your cholesterol will be based on your overall risk.

## What can I do to reduce my risk of heart disease?

If you take a statin medication, be sure to take it as directed. Statins help keep cholesterol and triglycerides at healthy levels. They also help your body process fats more effectively. If your cholesterol test levels improve after you start a statin, congratulations! This means the medication is working for you.

You can also make heart-healthy lifestyle choices. Contact your local Health Education Department to see options for joining a class, connecting with a wellness coach, or attending a heart health appointment with a health educator.

You can get help to:

- Quit smoking (if you smoke).
- Limit your alcohol intake.

- Start or boost your physical activity. Aim to get at least 30 minutes on most days.
- Eat more fresh fruits and vegetables and other heart-healthy foods. Ask your doctor about plant-based eating, the DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) diet, and other special eating plans.
- Manage your stress. Learning to reduce stress can help you make other healthier lifestyle changes. Try a stress-reducing activity that you think you would enjoy, such as walking, dancing, tai chi, yoga, or meditation. Find what works best for you.

If you have diabetes or high blood pressure (hypertension), work with your doctor or other practitioner to manage these conditions. Learn to monitor your blood sugar and/or blood pressure at home.

This information is not intended to diagnose or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor. If you have questions or need more information about your medication, please speak to your pharmacist. Kaiser Permanente does not endorse the medications or products mentioned. Any trade names listed are for easy identification only. Some photos may include models and not actual patients.