

Hypercholesterolemia

What is hypercholesterolemia?

Hypercholesterolemia is a condition in which the level of cholesterol in your blood is high. Cholesterol is a waxy substance that is present in many of your body tissues. It is manufactured in the liver from digested food (especially digested fats) and carried in the bloodstream to places it is needed. Cholesterol is also present in certain foods, such as egg yolk, liver, and shellfish.

A cholesterol reading shows a combination of both "good" and "bad" cholesterol. Low density lipoprotein (LDL), known as "bad" cholesterol, tends to get deposited in our arteries and causes atherosclerosis (clogged arteries). High density lipoprotein (HDL), known as "good" cholesterol, tends to unclog the arteries. However, there is usually more LDL than HDL cholesterol present in your blood.

A total cholesterol level of 200 or less is considered good. A level between 200 and 239 is borderline high. A reading of 240 or more is high and indicates you have hypercholesterolemia.

How does hypercholesterolemia occur?

Some families have an inherited tendency towards high blood cholesterol. Hypercholesterolemia can also be caused by other diseases, such as diabetes or disorders of the liver or thyroid gland. Most often, hypercholesterolemia is caused by the food you eat, especially food containing saturated fat (mainly animal fat).

What are the symptoms?

High blood cholesterol does not cause any symptoms.

How is it diagnosed?

High blood cholesterol is diagnosed by a blood test that is ordered by your health care provider, either at the time of a medical checkup or during an investigation of medical problems.

Hypercholesterolemia may also be detected during a public cholesterol screening, often given at health fairs. If your blood test shows a high total cholesterol level, you should discuss it with your health care provider.

How is it treated?

A diet that is low in fat (especially saturated fat) and low in cholesterol is the first line of treatment. Regular exercise, weight reduction if you are overweight, and quitting smoking are also important. If these measures are not enough, your doctor may prescribe medication that helps lower your cholesterol levels.

How can I take care of myself?

- ? Follow your health care provider's recommendations for lowering your blood cholesterol. A registered dietician will be able to instruct you on a low-cholesterol diet. Try to follow any dietary recommendations made by your health care provider, nutritionist, or dietician.
- ? Have your cholesterol checked regularly.
- ? If you smoke, quit. If you need help in quitting, ask your health care provider.
- ? Exercise daily. Walking is a great form of exercise. Walk at least 20 to 30 minutes a day if you can, as it takes that long for your body to begin burning stored fat.
- ? Read food labels carefully. Beware of "hidden" fat in prepackaged foods.
- ? Remind yourself that lower cholesterol means less risk of heart disease and stroke.