

# Understanding Cholesterol

**Blood cholesterol** is a waxy, fat-like substance made by your liver. Blood cholesterol is essential for good health. Your body needs it to perform important jobs, such as making hormones and digesting fatty foods. Cholesterol travels through the blood on proteins called *lipoproteins*. Two types of lipoproteins carry cholesterol throughout the body:

- **LDL (low-density lipoprotein)**, sometimes called “bad” cholesterol, makes up most of your body’s cholesterol. High levels of LDL cholesterol raise your risk for heart disease and stroke.
- **HDL (high-density lipoprotein)**, or “good” cholesterol, absorbs cholesterol and carries it back to the liver. The liver then flushes it from the body. High levels of HDL cholesterol can lower your risk for heart disease and stroke.

When your body has too much LDL cholesterol, the LDL cholesterol can build up on the walls of your blood vessels as *plaque*. As your blood vessels build up plaque over time, the insides of the vessels narrow, blocking blood flow to and from your heart and other organs.

High cholesterol usually has no signs or symptoms. The only way to know whether you have high cholesterol is to get your cholesterol checked. Your healthcare team can do a simple blood test, called a *lipid profile*, to measure your cholesterol levels. The lipid profile checks your levels of:

- LDL cholesterol
- HDL cholesterol
- Triglycerides – A type of fat in your blood that your body uses for energy. The combination of high levels of triglycerides with low HDL cholesterol or high LDL cholesterol levels can increase your risk for heart attack and stroke.
- Total cholesterol – The total amount of cholesterol in your blood based on your HDL, LDL, and triglycerides numbers.

Desirable Cholesterol Levels	
Total cholesterol	< 200 mg/dL
LDL cholesterol	< 100 mg/dL
HDL cholesterol	≥ 60 mg/dL
Triglycerides	< 150 mg/dL

Your cholesterol numbers are important, but they are just part of your overall health. Your healthcare provider will look at your cholesterol numbers along with your family history, age, gender, and other parts of your lifestyle or health that could raise your risk for high cholesterol. This complete picture determines whether you should take steps, such as lifestyle changes or cholesterol-lowering medicine, to lower your risk for heart disease and stroke. Talk to your healthcare team about your health history and how often you should have your cholesterol checked.

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ([www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov))