



Description

A total cholesterol level that is higher than the healthy range. The medical term is hypercholesterolemia. Cholesterol is a lipid (similar to fat) carried in the blood. It has several important functions in the body, but too much of it can cause problems. The liver makes all the cholesterol the body needs. More cholesterol comes from foods, such as meat, dairy products, and eggs.

Frequent Signs and Symptoms

High cholesterol in itself does not cause any symptoms.

Causes

Total cholesterol is made up LDL cholesterol and HDL cholesterol. A high level of LDL causes a fatty buildup in the walls of the arteries (blood vessels). That means less blood and oxygen get to the heart. This can lead to heart disease or stroke. LDL is called the "bad" cholesterol. HDL, the "good" cholesterol seems to have a protective effect against heart disease. Triglycerides are another form of fat in the blood. High levels of triglycerides may increase the risk of disease.

Risk Increases With:

- Too much saturated fat and cholesterol in the diet.
- Being overweight.
- Not being physically active.
- Heredity. High cholesterol can run in families.
- Age. As people get older, cholesterol levels rise. For women, LDL levels tend to rise after menopause.

Preventive Measures

- Eat a low-fat, healthy diet.
- Exercise on a routine basis.
- Maintain the proper body weight.
- Cholesterol and triglyceride testing every 3 to 5 years.

Expected Outcomes

High cholesterol can be lowered to desired levels with changes in lifestyle, or drugs, if needed.

Possible Complications

Heart disease and stroke. Other factors that can increase their risk include:

- Smoking
- Stress
- Medical problems, such as diabetes.
- Use of some drugs.
- High blood pressure.
- Age (men over 45, women over 55).
- Family history of early heart disease.
 - Atherosclerosis, which is hardening of the arteries.
 - There may be some decrease of kidney function.
 - Poor circulation.

Diagnosis and Treatment

General Measures

- Your health care provider will have your blood tested for cholesterol levels. The blood test will check for levels of total cholesterol, LDL, HDL, and triglycerides.
- The test results must be looked at on an individual basis, and take into account your other risk factors for heart disease. Cholesterol levels are measured in milligrams per deciliter (mg/dL).

Desired level for total cholesterol is less than 200; over 240 is considered high risk.

LDL below 130 is the recommended level; below 100 is ideal; over 160 is high risk.

HDL of 60 and above is good; under 40 is high risk.

Triglyceride of 150 is borderline high; 200 is high.

- You and your health care provider can decide on an action plan to reduce your risks of heart disease and stroke. This may include changes in diet, more exercise, weight loss, quitting smoking, and drugs.
- Diet and lifestyle changes do not mean you have to give up all the good things you enjoy.
- To learn more: American Heart Association, 7272 Greenville Ave., Dallas, TX 75231; (800) 242-8721; website: www.americanheart.org.



Medications

Cholesterol-lowering drugs may be prescribed if diet and exercise changes are not effective, or if you are at high risk for heart disease.

Activity

Increase physical activity. Try to get at least 30 minutes of aerobic exercise (such as walking) every day.

Diet

- Limit foods that contain saturated fats and high amounts of cholesterol. Read food labels carefully.
- Eat a diet high in fiber, with lots of fruits and vegetables.
- Begin a weight-reduction diet if you are overweight.

Notify the office if you or a family member wants to learn about your cholesterol levels or needs help with diet and exercise planning.