



## Clinical Risk Factors: Cholesterol



Keeping Connecticut Healthy  
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### Why is this important?

When you have too much cholesterol in your blood it can build up in your arteries and form "plaque". As plaque builds, the arteries narrow and blood flow to the heart slows. If a clot forms and blocks the blood supply to the heart or brain, it can cause a heart attack or stroke.

- According to the American Heart Association, about 105 million Americans have [total cholesterol](#) levels of 200 or higher—a level at which cardiovascular risk begins to rise.
- Individuals with [high total cholesterol](#) (240 mg/dL or higher) have more than twice the risk of heart disease as someone whose cholesterol level is in the desirable range (below 200 mg/dL).
- [LDL cholesterol](#) is the bad or "lousy" cholesterol. **The lower your LDL cholesterol, the lower your risk** of heart attack and stroke.
- [HDL cholesterol](#) is the good or "healthy" cholesterol; **the higher your HDL cholesterol the better.**
- While total cholesterol is important, it is even more important to keep LDL cholesterol low, and HDL cholesterol high.
- Reducing cholesterol levels by just 10% could cut heart disease by up to 30% - saving the Connecticut economy \$638 million in health care spending each year.

(See the [Online Resources](#) section for additional information.)

## How does this affect me?

High blood cholesterol is one of the major risk factors for heart disease that **can be controlled**.

Thanks to increased screening, heightened awareness and improved treatment, total cholesterol levels have declined among U.S. adults since the 1960s, especially among those 50 and older. But it is important to remain vigilant in order to reduce your risk of heart disease and stroke. A treatment plan to lower your cholesterol might include lifestyle and dietary changes, and/or medication.



### Age:

- Half of all Americans over 20 have cholesterol levels that are too high (200 mg/dL or higher)—a level at which [cardiovascular disease](#) risk begins to increase.
- The prevalence of high cholesterol generally increases with age.
- As people get older and/or heavier, their cholesterol & triglyceride levels tend to rise.

### Sex:

- Women generally have higher HDL (good) cholesterol levels than men.
- Women also tend to have higher triglyceride (not good) levels than men.

### Race & ethnicity:

- Whites tend to have higher rates of high cholesterol than blacks or Mexican Americans.
- Whites are also more likely than blacks or Mexican Americans to have been screened for high cholesterol and to be aware of their condition.

(See the [Facts & Figures](#) section for additional data.)

## Take control: Keep you HDL ↑ (high) & your LDL ↓ (low)!

Here are 5 of the most important steps you can take to control your cholesterol:

1. Eat a **healthy diet**, cutting back on foods high in [trans fat](#), [saturated fat](#) & [cholesterol](#), and increasing your intake of fruits, vegetables and fiber. Learn to read food labels.
2. Get regular **physical activity**.
3. Achieve or maintain a **healthy weight**.
4. **If you smoke, quit!** Smoking, being overweight and being sedentary can all lower your healthy HDL cholesterol.
5. If you drink alcohol, **drink less**.



**Note:** If your health care provider prescribes **medication**, be sure to take it as directed.  
(See [Online Resources](#) for additional information on *Medications & Patient Safety*.)

## Know Your Goals! <sup>1</sup>

Cholesterol is measured in milligrams per deciliter of blood (mg/dL). Be sure to have your health care provider interpret your cholesterol numbers, taking into account other risks factors such as your age, family history, smoking, hypertension, etc.

Total cholesterol (in mg/dL): the sum of all the cholesterol in your blood.

- < 200 = Desirable (relatively low risk of heart attack or stroke)
- 200 to 239 = Borderline high (increased risk for heart disease)
- ≥ 240 = High (twice the risk of coronary heart disease compared to people in the < 200 mg/dL range)

LDL (bad or "lousy") cholesterol (in mg/dL): keep your LDL ↓ (low).

- < 100 = Optimal (lower risk for heart disease)
- 100 to 129 = Near optimal/above optimal
- 130 to 159 = Borderline high
- 160 to 189 = High
- ≥ 190 = Very high (high risk for heart disease)

HDL (good or "healthy") cholesterol (in mg/dL): keep your HDL ↑ (high).

- ≥ 60 = High (desirable; protective against heart disease)
- 40 to 59 = Borderline low
- < 40 = Low (unfavorable; high risk for heart disease)

Triglycerides (in mg/dL): people with high triglycerides usually have lower HDL cholesterol & a higher risk of heart attack and stroke.

- < 150 = Normal
- 150 to 199 = Borderline high
- 200 to 499 = High
- ≥ 500 = Very high

<sup>1</sup> Source: Adult Treatment Panel (ATP) III Classification, National Cholesterol Education Program / National Heart, Lung & Blood Institute / National Institutes of Health.

References: Agency for Healthcare Research & Quality; American Heart Association; Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System; Centers for Disease Control & Prevention; Lab Tests Online; Mayo Clinic; MedlinePlus; Morbidity & Mortality Weekly Report; National Cholesterol Education Program / National Heart, Lung & Blood Institute; National Governors Association.

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