

Most health-conscious Americans know that high cholesterol is a leading risk factor for coronary heart disease. However, many people may not know what cholesterol is, what it does or even how to control cholesterol levels.

Cholesterol is a waxy substance made by the liver and also supplied in the diet through animal products such as meats, poultry, fish and dairy products. The body needs cholesterol to insulate nerves, make cell membranes and produce certain hormones. However, the body makes enough cholesterol, so any dietary cholesterol isn't needed.

Why should you care about your cholesterol level?

High cholesterol is a leading risk factor for heart disease. When there is too much cholesterol (a fat-like substance) in your blood, cholesterol and other substances build up in the walls of your arteries. This build up is called plaque. Over time, it causes "hardening of the arteries" so that arteries become narrowed and blood flow to the heart is slowed down. The blood carries oxygen to the heart, and if enough blood and oxygen cannot reach your heart, you may suffer chest pain. If the blood supply to a portion of the heart is completely cut off by a blockage, the result is a heart attack. Heart attacks most commonly occur when plaques become fragile and rupture. Then blood clots are formed and can completely cut off blood supply to a portion of the heart.

What do cholesterol numbers mean?

Everyone ages 20 and older should have their cholesterol measured at least once every five years. It is best to have a blood test called a "lipoprotein profile" to find out your cholesterol numbers. This blood test is done after a 9- to 12-hour fast and gives information about your:

- **Total cholesterol**
- **LDL ("bad") cholesterol** - the main source of cholesterol buildup and blockage in the arteries
- **HDL ("good") cholesterol** - helps keep cholesterol from building up in the arteries
- **Triglycerides** - another form of fat in your blood

What is your risk of developing heart disease or having a heart attack?

In general, the higher your LDL level and the more risk factors you have (other than LDL), the greater your chances of developing heart disease or having a heart attack. Some people are at high risk for a heart attack because they already have heart disease. Other people are at high risk for developing heart disease because they have diabetes (which is a major risk factor) or a combination of risk factors for heart disease.