

Cholesterol

Cholesterol is a fatty substance which is found in the blood. It is mainly produced by the liver. Cholesterol plays an essential role in how every cell in the body works. However, too much cholesterol in the blood can increase your risk of cardiovascular disease.

Cholesterol is carried around the body by lipoproteins. Lipoproteins are a combination of cholesterol and proteins. There are two main types.

- LDL (low-density lipoproteins) is the harmful type of cholesterol. This is sometimes called LDL cholesterol.
- HDL (high-density lipoproteins) is a protective type of cholesterol. It is sometimes called HDL cholesterol.

Having too much harmful cholesterol in your blood can increase your risk of getting cardiovascular disease. The risk is particularly high if you have a high level of LDL cholesterol and a low level of HDL cholesterol.

What causes high cholesterol?

However, some people have high blood cholesterol even though they eat a healthy diet. For example, they may have inherited a condition called familial hypercholesterolaemia (FH).

Triglycerides

Triglycerides are another type of fatty substance in the blood. People with a high triglyceride level have a greater risk of developing cardiovascular disease.

Triglycerides are found in foods from animal sources, like dairy products and meat. People who are overweight, or who eat a lot of fatty and sugary foods, or who regularly drink too much alcohol, are more likely to have high triglyceride levels.

What you can do :

To help reach a healthy cholesterol level and reduce your risk of cardiovascular disease, you need to do the following:

- Cut right down on saturated fats and replace them with monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats.
- Cut down on foods containing trans fats.

Also, taking part in regular physical activity can help to increase your HDL cholesterol (the 'protective' type of cholesterol).

Will I need to take cholesterol-lowering medicine?

Your doctor may prescribe cholesterol-lowering medicine for you, such as statins. Whether you need to take medicine to lower your cholesterol depends not just on your cholesterol level, but also on your overall risk of cardiovascular disease. For example, if you don't have a high cholesterol level, but you do have a high overall risk of cardiovascular disease, it is likely that you will benefit from taking cholesterol-lowering medicine to protect your heart.

Physical activity

Physical activity has many benefits, both for your heart and for your general wellbeing. It helps to:

- lower your blood pressure
- improve your cholesterol levels
- control your weight and body shape
- reduce the risk of diabetes or help control diabetes
- relieve stress and anxiety and help you look and feel good
- prevent blood clotting
- improve muscle and bone strength, and
- reduce the risk of certain types of cancer.

What you can do

The best activity for your heart health is moderate-intensity rhythmic (aerobic) activity – for example, brisk walking, cycling or swimming. 'Moderate-intensity' means that it should make you feel warm and breathe more heavily than usual, but you should still be able to talk.

Aim to do at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity a week. For example, you could do 30 minutes a day on at least five days a week.

You can do the 30 minutes either all in one go or in several shorter bouts of about 10 minutes at a time. However, if you're not used to doing this amount of physical activity, it is important that you build up to this level over a period of time.

Try building activity into your daily routine. Choosing a mixture of activities will help keep you motivated. Some good options include:

- taking the stairs instead of the lift or escalator
- gardening and housework
- walking as much as possible in your lunch break
- getting off the bus or train one stop earlier when you go to work or do the shopping, and
- getting an exercise DVD and doing your exercise at home.

Whatever sort of exercise you do ...

- Build up your physical activity level gradually.
 - Make sure you warm up before and cool down after each period of exercise. That means starting slowly for the first few minutes and building up gradually, and at the end, spending some time slowing down gradually.
 - Avoid doing activities after a large meal, or in very hot or very cold temperatures, or at high altitudes.
 - If you have any long-term illness, have high blood pressure, or are taking medicine, or if you're not sure about the level of exercise you should be doing, speak to your doctor before you start exercising.
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- If you feel tired, breathless or dizzy, or if you have pain or feel unwell, stop exercising. If the symptoms don't go away, or if they come back later, see your doctor or go to your nearest accident and emergency department.

Weight and body shape

If you're overweight or obese, you have a higher risk of developing cardiovascular disease. Keeping to a healthy weight and body shape can help to protect you against diabetes and high blood pressure, and also helps to control your cholesterol level.

Fatty and sweet foods are very high in calories. If you eat more calories than your body burns up, these extra calories are stored as fat, resulting in weight gain. You are even more likely to put this weight on if you are physically inactive.