

Cholesterol levels: What numbers should you aim for?

Figuring out the best cholesterol levels to aim for can be confusing. But here's some help setting your cholesterol number targets.

It's important to keep your cholesterol levels within healthy limits. And if you have other risk factors for developing heart disease, you need to be even more careful — especially with your low-density lipoprotein (LDL), or "bad," cholesterol level.

Interpreting your cholesterol numbers

Cholesterol levels are measured in milligrams (mg) of cholesterol per deciliter (dL) of blood in the United States. Consider these general guidelines when you get your cholesterol test (lipid panel or lipid profile) results back to see if your cholesterol falls in an ideal range.

Total cholesterol

Below 200 mg/dL	Desirable
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200-239 mg/dL	Borderline high
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240 mg/dL and above	High
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LDL cholesterol

Below 70 mg/dL	Ideal for people at very high risk of heart disease
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Below 100 mg/dL	Ideal for people at risk of heart disease
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100-129 mg/dL	Near ideal
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130-159 mg/dL	Borderline high
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160-189 mg/dL	High
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190 mg/dL and above	Very high
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HDL cholesterol

Below 40 mg/dL (men)	Poor
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Below 50 mg/dL (women)	
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50-59 mg/dL	Better
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60 mg/dL and above	Best
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Triglycerides

Below 150 mg/dL	Desirable
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150-199 mg/dL	Borderline high
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200-499 mg/dL	High
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500 mg/dL and above	Very high
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The American Heart Association (AHA) recommends that a triglyceride level of 100 mg/dL or lower is considered "optimal." The AHA says this optimal level would improve your heart health. However, the AHA doesn't recommend drug treatment to reach this level. Instead, for those trying to lower their triglycerides to this level, lifestyle changes such as diet, weight loss and physical activity are encouraged. That's because triglycerides usually respond well to dietary and lifestyle changes.

LDL targets differ

Because LDL cholesterol is a major risk factor for heart disease, it's the main focus of cholesterol-lowering treatment. Your target LDL number can vary, depending on your underlying risk of heart disease.

Most people should aim for an LDL level below 130 mg/dL. If you have other risk factors for heart disease, your target LDL may be below 100 mg/dL. If you're at very high risk of heart disease, you may need to aim for an LDL level below 70 mg/dL. In general, the lower your LDL cholesterol level is, the better.

You're considered to be at a high risk of heart disease if you have:

- A previous heart attack or stroke
- Artery blockages in your neck (carotid artery disease)
- Artery blockages in your arms or legs (peripheral artery disease)

In addition, two or more of the following risk factors might also place you in the very high risk group:

- Smoking
- High blood pressure
- Low HDL cholesterol
- Diabetes
- Family history of early heart disease
- Age older than 45 if you're a man, or older than 55 if you're a woman
- Elevated lipoprotein (a), another type of fat (lipid) in your blood

Types of cholesterol

LDL cholesterol can build up on the inside of artery walls, contributing to artery blockages that can lead to heart attacks. Higher LDL cholesterol levels mean higher risk. High-density lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol is known as "good" cholesterol because it helps prevent arteries from becoming clogged. Higher HDL cholesterol levels generally mean lower risk.

A blood test to check cholesterol levels — called a lipid panel or lipid profile — typically reports:

- Total cholesterol
- HDL cholesterol
- LDL cholesterol
- Triglycerides, a type of fat often increased by sweets and alcohol

For the most accurate measurements, don't eat or drink anything (other than water) for nine to 12 hours before the blood sample is taken.

Lifestyle changes

If your LDL cholesterol is too high, the first thing your doctor will probably suggest is lifestyle changes. These changes include:

- Quitting smoking
- Eating more soluble fiber, found in oatmeal, beans, fruits and vegetables
- Eating less fat and cholesterol from meat and dairy products
- Losing weight
- Exercising at least 30 minutes a day on most days of the week

Being overweight and inactive tends to increase your LDL cholesterol and lower your HDL cholesterol, exactly the opposite of what you want. Exercise and weight loss can help reverse this trend. This is especially important for people who have large waist measurements — more than 40 inches (101.6 centimeters) for men and more than 35 inches (88.9 centimeters) for women — because people with this body shape are more likely to develop heart disease.

Medications may be needed

When lifestyle changes aren't enough to reach your cholesterol targets, your doctor may prescribe medications to help lower your cholesterol levels. These drugs, such as statins, aren't a replacement for lifestyle changes.

You'll still need to eat properly and exercise.

A hidden risk factor

High cholesterol has no symptoms, but your genetic makeup — reflected in family history of high cholesterol or heart disease — might make you more prone to high cholesterol, even if you eat right and exercise.

That's why it's so important to have a baseline cholesterol test at age 20 and have follow-up tests at least once every five years. Finding the problem early allows you to take action before it's too late. Your doctor may recommend more frequent cholesterol tests if your total cholesterol level or LDL cholesterol level is high, or if you have a family history of heart disease or high cholesterol.