



Heart-Healthy Tips: Control Your Cholesterol

Courtesy of the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs

High cholesterol affects Americans of all ages and sizes. Although cholesterol is needed by our bodies to create healthy cells, Vitamin D and certain hormones, too much cholesterol clogs the blood vessels. This condition can slow down and even stop blood flow, enhancing the possibility of cardiovascular disease, coronary disease, heart attacks, and strokes. According to a medical study done by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), high cholesterol levels are not only bad for the heart and blood vessels, but they may also increase the risk of cognitive impairment, which may lead to Alzheimer's disease.

Screening and prevention are two smart ways to combat high cholesterol and subsequent health problems. A simple blood test lets you and your doctor know your total blood cholesterol level and allows your doctor to recommend treatment. Keep these tips in mind when considering cholesterol screening:

- ▶ Your total blood cholesterol level should be 200 mg/dl or less, but it can differ from person to person based on weight, lifestyle, and family history.
- ▶ Request a blood test that provides separate levels of "bad" (LDL) cholesterol and "good" (HDL) cholesterol. High levels of HDL cholesterol help to prevent heart disease. Your HDL level should at least be over 40. Levels above 60 are considered even more protective against coronary disease. Your LDL level should be under 100.
- ▶ Everyone 20 or older should have his or her cholesterol checked at least every five years.
- ▶ Be aware of your family's medical history. Your total blood cholesterol level may be increased if you are a male over 45 or a female over 55; if you are a smoker; or if you have a family history of high blood pressure or heart attacks before 55 for males or 65 for females.

While the aforementioned cholesterol levels are average, ask your healthcare provider about an acceptable cholesterol level for you and how often you need it checked.

Although cholesterol-lowering drugs do exist, prevention is the best combatant against high-risk cholesterol levels. A healthy diet and exercise are key in preventing LDL cholesterol build-up. Follow these guidelines for preventing high-risk cholesterol levels:

Find more health and wellness tips and resources for first responders at www.healthy-firefighter.org.

- ▶ Limit your intake of saturated fat, which stimulates the production of cholesterol in the liver. Saturated fat is generally found in beef, pork, and fattening dairy items. High cholesterol foods also include egg yolks, organ meats, and shellfish.
- ▶ As an alternative, eat more broiled or grilled fish and skinless chicken breasts. Choose lean cuts of beef, pork, and lamb. Choose low-fat or non-fat dairy products.
- ▶ Eat smaller portions and a variety of foods. Include fiber-rich dark grains, oats, and all fruits and vegetables in your diet.
- ▶ Exercise at least three to five times a week for 20-30 minutes. Being physically active will help lower LDL cholesterol and raise HDL cholesterol.

To learn more, visit the National Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention [web site](#). Find out more about heart health from the [Heart-Healthy Firefighter Program](#).