

Women's *Heart Advantage*

Heart Healthy Information: Women and Cholesterol

What is cholesterol?

Cholesterol is fat that is made by the body. It helps many parts of the body function normally. It protects nerves and is used by the body to make female hormones. But heart problems can occur when the blood has too much cholesterol.

What causes high cholesterol levels?

There are several reasons for high cholesterol levels. The body may make more cholesterol than it needs, or you may have inherited a tendency to make too much cholesterol. You may also have a high cholesterol from eating too much of the wrong kinds of food.

Why are high cholesterol levels a problem?

High cholesterol levels can double your risk for heart disease. A history of heart disease in your family adds to this risk. Other factors such as smoking, high blood pressure, diabetes, obesity or lack of exercise can also contribute to your risk of developing heart disease. The good news is that you can control your cholesterol levels.

When should I have my cholesterol checked?

If any risk is present, you should have your cholesterol checked by the age of 20. If no risks are present, you should have your first cholesterol level drawn by the age of 45.

What is the cholesterol test?

It is a simple blood test done first thing in the morning on an empty stomach. The cholesterol test measures the types of cholesterol and fat in your blood. Your doctor should review the following results with you:

- **Total Cholesterol** measures all the cholesterol in your blood. The goal is a level less than 200 mg/dl. Even more important are the following:
- **High Density Lipoprotein (HDL)** or (Highly Desirable Lipid) is the "good" cholesterol that removes cholesterol from the blood. Your goal should be a level greater than 50 mg/dl.
- **Low Density Lipoprotein (LDL)** or (Less Desirable Lipids) is the "bad" cholesterol that leads to fat buildup in blood vessels. Depending on your heart disease risk, the goal ranges from a level less than 160 mg/dl to a level less than 100mg/dl. Talk to your doctor about what your goal should be.
- **Triglycerides** are fats made from the sugars, alcohol and carbohydrates you eat. Your goal should be a level less than 150 mg/dl.

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Santa Cruz
Medical Foundation

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Women's Heart Advantage is an educational program sponsored by the doctors, nurses and hospitals of Sutter Health to raise awareness of women's heart disease, risk factors, early detection, and treatment. This information is provided to help you understand how certain factors can affect your chances for heart disease and how to help control them. For more information, visit www.hearts.sutterhealth.org.

What can I do to improve my cholesterol levels?

There are three ways you can make your cholesterol levels better: diet, weight control and exercise.

Diet: Eat more vegetables, fruits and whole grains, and use low or non-fat dairy products. You should also substitute olive oil, grapeseed, canola or safflower oil for butter, lard or solid-stick margarine. Avoid alcohol and sugary foods, as well as foods that contain saturated, hydrogenated, partially hydrogenated fats or trans fats. Read food labels to make healthy decisions.

Weight control: Maintain a healthy weight. Extra weight can increase your blood pressure, level of bad cholesterol and your chance of developing diabetes. Even reducing your weight by 10 percent can improve your health.

Exercise: Get 30 minutes of exercise most days of the week. Using your large muscles (also called aerobic exercise) can result in weight loss, better cholesterol levels and a more normal blood sugar. Examples of aerobic exercises include brisk walking, bicycling, hiking and swimming. You should talk with your doctor before starting an exercise program.

Family history has a very strong influence on your cholesterol levels. It's possible that you can follow all these suggestions and still need to take cholesterol-lowering medication. Talk with your doctor about your cholesterol levels. This will help you understand your cholesterol results and how to reach your goals.

Your health is your most important asset, and it's never too late to make positive changes.



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