

Understanding Cholesterol and Heart Disease

Over the years, the word cholesterol has earned a well-deserved negative reputation. There are many types of cholesterol, and not all of them are bad.

But your body actually uses healthy amounts of cholesterol to make hormones and build cells.

“Cholesterol is produced just like many other substances, fats, carbohydrates and proteins, and it's a part of the body's metabolism or makeup.”

The problems begin when levels of dangerous cholesterol build up in your blood, increasing your risk of heart attack, stroke, and other serious health conditions.

“Cholesterol is definitely a big player in cardiac events. And it's one of the leading causes of heart attacks, by the fact that it causes the plaques to increase.”

Having too much cholesterol in your blood is dangerous because it can build up on your artery walls.

If this happens in the tiny arteries that feed your heart, the artery becomes narrow. If pieces of cholesterol break off, the artery may become blocked. The result is a heart attack.

Cholesterol is created mostly from the fat we eat, especially saturated fats and trans fats.

Saturated fats are found in animal fats from beef, veal, lamb, pork, butter, full fat or whole milk and cheeses.

They are also found in a few plants such as coconut or palm oil.

Trans fats are formed when liquid oils are made into solid fats like shortening and hard margarine.

They are found in partially hydrogenated oils used in restaurants, some margarine products, crackers, and many packaged snacks such as cookies.

“The trans fatty acids are terrible, they are absolutely terrible, they can infiltrate the blood vessel walls, they make the LDL cholesterol higher, they are very bad.”

So, eating fats, such as saturated fats and trans fats, can raise blood cholesterol levels more than other types of food.

These fats are especially dangerous because of the way they affect the cholesterol in your blood. Cholesterol by itself is just a fat. It can't travel through your bloodstream on its own. Instead, it's carried in special carrier packages called “lipoproteins.”

Lipoproteins are classified by their size and density.

High-density lipoproteins, or HDLs, are considered “good cholesterol” because they help remove cholesterol from the blood stream.

Low-density lipoproteins, or LDLs, can penetrate the artery wall more easily to create a cholesterol build-up. LDLs are known as “bad cholesterol.”

Understanding Cholesterol and Heart Disease

When LDL cholesterol combines with other substances in the artery, it can create plaques that make it harder for your artery to pump blood. This process is called atherosclerosis and can happen in any artery. When it happens in the arteries that feed your heart, known as the coronary arteries, it is called coronary artery disease.

Atherosclerosis is a major cause of heart attacks and strokes.

“Atherosclerosis, the basic term is hardening of the arteries, where the arteries through the years developed scarring or fibrosis a little bit of calcium, they also develop cholesterol deposits in the artery wall. And atherosclerosis is basically that process, the hardening and calcifying of the arteries, and that's what leads to eventually heart attacks and strokes.”

But there are steps you can take to reduce the level of bad cholesterol in your body. Choose foods that have healthy fats in them more often.

Polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats are both unsaturated fats and help lower blood cholesterol.

They're found in vegetable oil, sunflower oil and fish.

Other polyunsaturated fats contain omega-3 fatty acids that help keep blood platelets from sticking together.

Omega-3 can be found in fatty or oily fish such as tuna, salmon and mackerel. Add physical activity to your daily routine.

Get regular blood work done to check your cholesterol level. And set up a meeting with your healthcare provider to talk about ways to reduce your bad cholesterol and risk of heart disease today.