

MYTHS ABOUT HIGH CHOLESTEROL



It's possible to lower the risk of high cholesterol by eating well and being physically active. Therefore, it's tempting to think that only people who eat badly and don't exercise can have this condition. But is that true?

There are health campaigns about how lifestyle factors put you at risk for high cholesterol. Many people assume they're risk-free if they're in a healthy weight range, don't eat too unhealthily and exercise.

But since having high cholesterol (also referred to as hyperlipidaemia) doesn't usually have physical symptoms, you can't judge a person's heart health by their appearance. We've put together some myth busters so you can check if you've got your facts straight about high cholesterol.



FALSE: ALL CHOLESTEROL IS BAD FOR YOU

Cholesterol is essential for building healthy cells, producing hormones like testosterone and oestrogen as well as vitamin D. The problem comes when you have too much of it. High cholesterol levels may cause you to develop fatty deposits in your blood vessels, which makes it difficult for enough blood to flow through your arteries. If your heart doesn't get as much oxygen-rich blood as it needs, your risk of a heart attack increases. Less blood flow to your brain can also cause a stroke.

A full cholesterol test measures two different kinds of cholesterol, namely low-density lipoprotein (LDL) and high-density lipoprotein (HDL):

- **LDL cholesterol**, the so-called 'bad' cholesterol, carries cholesterol from the liver to the rest of the body where it is used to repair cell membranes or make hormones. When there is too much cholesterol in the blood, these particles stick to the walls of the arteries and major blood vessels throughout the body where they gradually cause a blockage or narrowing of the arteries.
- **HDL cholesterol**, the so-called 'good' cholesterol, moves through the liver, where it removes excess cholesterol from the tissues and blood vessels and disposes of it before it can do any damage. The ratio of good to bad cholesterol is therefore essential in preventing a build-up of cholesterol in your arteries.
- Triglycerides are the most common type of fat in the body and they store excess energy from your diet. Our body uses triglycerides for energy. But if the triglycerides are not converted into energy by our body between meals, they are stored in various places, one of which is in our fat cells.



FALSE: YOU CAN'T HAVE HIGH CHOLESTEROL IF YOU'RE IN SHAPE AND EXERCISE

Not all cases of high cholesterol are due to poor diet and lack of exercise. You can have high cholesterol even if you're not overweight. An underactive thyroid gland, medicine that you're taking, chronic kidney failure or alcohol abuse can all cause high cholesterol. Some people have naturally high blood cholesterol levels due to a rare hereditary condition called familial hypercholesterolaemia.



FALSE: YOU'RE SAFE IF YOU AVOID JUNK FOOD AND TAKEAWAYS

Our body produces its own cholesterol from the foods we eat. Our liver and intestine make cholesterol by converting fats and carbohydrates, so what you eat influences your cholesterol. The most common cause of high cholesterol is eating too much saturated fat. But this doesn't mean you're safe if you avoid takeaways and obvious junk food like chips. People usually build up cholesterol slowly by eating a little too much fat every day.

You can build up high cholesterol slowly from the hard margarine on your bread, regularly adding a dash of butter to your cooking for taste, or even just eating the visible fat on meat. Check the labels of processed foods to see how much saturated fat and trans fat they contain. Triglycerides are also affected by the sugar we eat, so eating sweet foods or overeating at mealtimes will raise your body's triglyceride levels.



PARTIALLY TRUE: YOU CAN LOWER YOUR CHOLESTEROL LEVELS BY CHANGING YOUR LIFESTYLE

Exercise and diet can lower your cholesterol, depending on why you have high cholesterol. If your levels are dangerously high or your cholesterol is not caused by lifestyle factors in the first place, your doctor may prescribe medicine to bring your cholesterol down.



LOWER YOUR CHOLESTEROL YOURSELF BY:

- Being physically active
- Replacing saturated fats with unsaturated fats
- Drinking alcohol in moderation (if you drink alcohol)
- Choosing healthier cooking methods
- Adding more fish to your diet
- Adding more fibre and plant sterols to your diet
- Cutting back on sugar in foods. Eat complex carbohydrates like sweet potatoes, whole grains like bulgar wheat, quinoa, brown rice and legumes rather than refined carbohydrates like bread, pasta and white rice.



TRUE: YOU ONLY NEED A DROP OF BLOOD FOR A CHOLESTEROL TEST

Your doctor or pharmacy probably has a machine that measures cholesterol. It only needs a biggish drop of blood. Ask your doctor ahead of time if you should avoid eating or drinking for up to 12 hours before the test. Since high cholesterol doesn't usually have symptoms, a blood test is the only way to know your cholesterol levels.

So don't leave it until it's too late. Book a test at your GP or nearest clinic to find out where you stand. Remember, true wellness starts with having an accurate idea of your current health status!

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