



Considering Cholesterol

FOR THE PATIENT FROM THE NATIONAL LIPID EDUCATION COUNCIL™

SUMMER 2001

KNOW YOUR LIPID LEVELS*

(measured in milligrams per
deciliter [mg/dL])

HDL-C

Less than 40:	Low
60 or more:	High

LDL-C

190 or more:	Very high
160–189:	High
130–159:	Borderline high
100–129:	Near/above optimal

Less than 100:	Optimal
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TOTAL CHOLESTEROL

240 or more:	High
200–239:	Borderline high
Less than 200:	Desirable

* The National Cholesterol Education Program has recently updated its guidelines; hence, the optimal cholesterol targets listed here differ from those listed in the Spring 2001 issue of *Considering Cholesterol*.

Today's Class: Basic Cholesterol Knowledge

Learning about—and really understanding—cholesterol and heart disease isn't as difficult as you may think.

What Is Cholesterol?

Cholesterol is a naturally occurring waxy substance found in all body parts, and it is crucial in order for your body to function properly. It is acquired in two ways: your body makes it naturally, and you ingest it through certain foods. When there is a normal amount of cholesterol circulating in your blood, it helps your body complete such processes as making hormones and digesting fat. When your body has too much cholesterol, however, you need to worry about heart disease.

How Can Cholesterol Be Both "Good" and "Bad"?

Cholesterol is transported through the bloodstream in packages called "lipoproteins." High-density lipoprotein, or HDL, carries the "good" cholesterol, while low-density lipoprotein, or LDL, carries the "bad" cholesterol. To remember this distinction, use this simple rule of thumb:

- ▶ "H" is for "high"
- ▶ "L" is for "low"

Your ultimate goal should be to have a high level of HDL-cholesterol and a low level of LDL-cholesterol to help reduce your chances of getting heart disease. (See box at left for new cholesterol ranges just issued by the government and the levels for which you should aim.)

LDL interacts with other substances and with certain cells to form plaque buildup on the artery walls, which makes it difficult for blood to flow freely to and from your heart. This buildup is heart disease that can lead to chest pain or heart attack, with a real possibility of death.

HDL, on the other hand, removes cholesterol from the blood and passes it to the liver to be processed and ultimately excreted. High levels of HDL can help protect the heart.

Some Major Causes of High Cholesterol

High-fat diet	Family history of elevated cholesterol
Little or no physical activity	Cigarette smoking
Overweight	Diabetes

Passing Your Cholesterol "Exam"

There are simple steps you can take to make sure that your cholesterol is under control:

- ▶ Get "tested" (cholesterol screening) at least every 5 years.
- ▶ Become knowledgeable regarding your "numbers" (cholesterol levels).
- ▶ Meet with your doctor regularly.
- ▶ Become a serious "scholar" of healthier living (exercise regularly, eat a balanced diet, quit smoking).

If you need extra help in achieving desirable cholesterol readings, your physician can help with advice and monitoring and, if necessary, can prescribe a cholesterol-lowering drug (alone or in combination with another) to help you reach your goal. Typically, physicians recommend one of four types of medications: a statin; a bile acid sequestrant; a nicotinic acid; or a fibric-acid derivative. Statins are the most prescribed of the cholesterol drugs, but your doctor will assess which one(s) is/are appropriate for your individual needs.

Don't be Afraid to Ask Questions!

Finally, don't be afraid to ask any questions you may have regarding your cholesterol. By following your doctor's suggestions and living a healthy lifestyle, you can reduce your risk for getting coronary heart disease or prevent existing heart disease from getting worse. (See box above for some causes of high cholesterol.) Controlling your cholesterol is one of the most important—and easiest-to-follow—medical lessons there is for a healthy heart. ♥