



Do you know your numbers?

Many people don't know their cholesterol levels are too high because there are usually no symptoms. Yet too much cholesterol in your blood is a major risk factor for heart disease and stroke — the nation's No. 1 and No. 4 killers.

Cholesterol is a waxy substance in your blood that comes from two sources: your body makes it and it's in food, especially foods high in saturated and trans fats. Cholesterol is generally considered to be both "good" (HDL) and "bad" (LDL).

Excess cholesterol can turn into artery-clogging plaque, making it harder for your heart to circulate blood and contributing to blockages that can lead to heart attacks. That's more likely to happen as you get older. Obesity, eating a lot of fatty foods, gender and genetics can also affect cholesterol levels.

More than 40 percent of the U.S. adult population is projected to have some form of cardiovascular disease by 2030, with direct and indirect costs exceeding \$1 trillion annually.

There's a lot you can do to improve your cholesterol — beginning with consuming healthy foods, such as whole grains and high-fiber foods like oatmeal, barley, beans, lentils and brown rice. Likewise, eat tomatoes, avocados, pears, bananas, apples and other high-fiber fruits and veggies. Fish, omega-3 fatty acids, peanuts, walnuts, almonds, lean meats and poultry without skin are also excellent food choices. What's more, try using olive or canola oil instead of butter or shortening, and use fat-free and low-fat dairy products.

Being physically active and maintaining a healthy weight can also help some people to lower their cholesterol. Aim for 40 minutes of moderate to vigorous aerobic exercise three to four times a week. You don't have to go to a gym; brisk walking will do. Remember, even a modest weight loss can lower your risk.

It is important to be tested and talk to your doctor to make sure your numbers are at healthy levels.

Below are the guidelines for total cholesterol:

- Desirable: less than 200 mg/dL
- Borderline high: 200 to 239 mg/dL
- High: 240 mg/dL and greater

Below are the guidelines for triglycerides:

- Normal: less than 150 mg/dL
- Borderline high: 150 to 199 mg/dL
- High: 200 to 499 mg/dL
- Very high: 500 mg/dL and greater

The above guidelines are a helpful starting point. But if treatment is needed, you and your physician will determine what treatment is best for you based on a personalized assessment of your overall risk, not only your numbers.

-- Information provided by Blue Cross Blue Shield of North Dakota