

# What you should know about cholesterol

**K**nowing about cholesterol – the good and the bad – can be very important to your health. This information could help you avoid heart disease later in life because your risk of heart disease increases as your blood levels of “bad” cholesterol increase.

If you have high cholesterol, changes in your eating habits, other lifestyle changes, and, if necessary, drugs can help you lower your cholesterol levels. High cholesterol is an important concern for everyone. One in 2 American adults and more

than 1 in 3 American youths under age 19 have high cholesterol.

There may be good news for adolescent boys with a family history of high cholesterol. Researchers report in the January 13, 1999, issue of *JAMA* that such boys between the ages of 10 and 17 taking the drug lovastatin reduced their levels of LDL cholesterol, the so-called bad cholesterol, anywhere from 17% to 27%, depending on dosage. The drug did not appear to have any adverse effects on the boys’ growth or sexual development.

## WHAT IS CHOLESTEROL?

**Cholesterol** is a substance that your body needs in order to make hormones and vitamin D, and that helps your body process the fats you eat. It is known chemically as a **lipid**. The total cholesterol level in the blood is often measured, but there are 3 main types of cholesterol: **high density lipoprotein (HDL)**, which is considered “good” cholesterol; and **low density lipoprotein (LDL)** or **very low density lipoprotein (VLDL)**, which are both considered “bad” cholesterol. Cholesterol levels are affected by a number of factors, including eating foods with too much saturated fat or cholesterol, being overweight, physical inactivity, inherited health traits, and your age and gender. When there is too much “bad” cholesterol in the blood, the excess can build up on the walls of the arteries and cause a number of

health problems. You need to be aware of your cholesterol levels, because if your HDL level is too low or your LDL or VLDL levels are too high, you may be on your way to developing heart disease.



## WHAT DOES YOUR CHOLESTEROL LEVEL MEAN?

Total Blood Cholesterol	Desirable	Borderline-High	High
	Less than 200 mg/dL	200-239 mg/dL	240 mg/dL or more

These cholesterol levels are for anyone 20 years of age or older.

Additional Sources: National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, American Heart Association, AMA's Encyclopedia of Medicine

Mi Young Hwang, Writer

Richard M. Glass, MD, Editor

Jeff Molter, Director of Science News

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## SHOULD YOU HAVE YOUR CHOLESTEROL CHECKED?

- All adults 20 years old or older should have their cholesterol checked at least once every 5 years.
- You should have your cholesterol checked more frequently if you are older than 45 (for men) or 55 (for women) or have a family history of high cholesterol.
- Your doctor can test your total cholesterol and HDL levels with a simple blood test.

## HOW YOU CAN LOWER YOUR CHOLESTEROL:

- Eat foods low in saturated fat, total fat, and cholesterol
- Eat foods high in starch and fiber (fruits, vegetables, breads, cereals, grains, pasta, dry peas, beans)
- Exercise regularly
- If you are overweight, lose weight

## FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- American Heart Association  
800/AHA-USA1 or  
[www.americanheart.org](http://www.americanheart.org)
- National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI) Information Center  
P.O. Box 30105  
Bethesda, MD 20824-0105  
800/575-WELL (recording) or  
301/251-1222  
or [www.nhlbi.nih.gov](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov)

## INFORM YOURSELF:

To find this and previous *JAMA* Patient Pages, check out the AMA's Web site at [www.ama-assn.org/consumer.htm](http://www.ama-assn.org/consumer.htm). Other *JAMA* Patient Pages dealing with heart disease were published on May 6, 1998, and October 28, 1998.

