

Cholesterol: Why Should You Care? And Where Does it Come From?

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High cholesterol is something icky that happens to older people—right?

Not exactly, high cholesterol can start to be a problem during the teenage years. Teenagers can develop habits that lead to high cholesterol in adulthood. Sometimes high cholesterol can be caused by your genes, and sometimes by diet and lifestyle.

Wherever it comes from, it's definitely something teens want to avoid, because it can lead to serious illness.

Just what is cholesterol?

Cholesterol is a waxy substance produced naturally in our bodies by the liver. It's also found in foods that come from animals, like eggs, meats, and whole-fat dairy products. It lurks in lots of yummy things like burgers, fries, chips, cheese curls, and other processed foods. There's no cholesterol in vegetables, fruits and grains.

It's important to have some cholesterol in your body because it helps build cell walls, make vitamin D and some hormones, and digest fat. Your liver produces enough cholesterol every day—about 1,000 milligrams—so that you don't need any extra from food. But many foods contain cholesterol, so it's hard to avoid getting at least another 150 to 200 milligrams a day.

What happens if your cholesterol is high?

If you have too much so-called "bad" cholesterol, you can develop fatty deposits in your blood vessels, which makes it hard for blood to flow through your arteries to your heart and brain. That's why people with high cholesterol are at higher risk for heart attacks and strokes. Your doctor can check your cholesterol level with a simple blood test.

Why is some cholesterol "good" and some "bad"?

In the body, cholesterol moves around by combining with proteins to form "lipoproteins." One type is high-density lipoproteins (HDL); another is low-density lipoproteins (LDL). HDL is "good" cholesterol

because it actually helps remove “bad” cholesterol from blood vessels. But LDL is the “bad” kind that clogs up blood vessels.

How do you get high cholesterol?

Sometimes you can be prone to high cholesterol because it runs in your family. If that’s the case, you might be prescribed medication to keep the level down.

But diet and lifestyle play a huge role, too.

Eating “bad” fats is a major cause of high cholesterol in the United States. Bad fats are “trans fats”—liquid fats that are hydrogenated to make them solid. Unfortunately, many processed foods are made with trans fats—fast food, packaged baked goods, margarine, pizza dough, ramen noodle cups, microwave popcorn, and lots more.

You can also get high cholesterol if you’re overweight or don’t get enough exercise.

How to keep your cholesterol level down

First and foremost, try to stay away from processed foods that contain saturated fat or trans-fat. Instead, choose foods with “good” fats—fish, nuts like walnuts and almonds, and olive oil all fit the bill. Choose low-fat dairy products and trans fat-free margarine. Stick with “real” food like fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and legumes. You might not be able to steer clear of foods with bad fats all the time—after all, these items are everywhere—but every little bit will help.

And, of course, try to keep your weight down and get regular exercise!