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HDL: The "Good" Cholesterol

Also called: High-density lipoprotein

What is cholesterol?

Cholesterol [<https://medlineplus.gov/cholesterol.html>] is a waxy, fat-like substance that's found in all the cells in your body. Your liver makes cholesterol, and it is also in some foods, such as meat and dairy products. Your body needs some cholesterol to work properly. But having too much cholesterol in your blood raises your risk of **coronary artery disease** [<https://medlineplus.gov/coronaryarterydisease.html>] .

What are HDL and LDL?

HDL and LDL [<https://medlineplus.gov/ldlthebadcholesterol.html>] are two types of lipoproteins. They are a combination of fat (lipid) and protein. The lipids need to be attached to the proteins so they can move through the blood. HDL and LDL have different purposes:

- HDL stands for high-density lipoproteins. It is sometimes called the "good" cholesterol because it carries cholesterol from other parts of your body back to your liver. Your liver then removes the cholesterol from your body.
- LDL stands for low-density lipoproteins. It is sometimes called the "bad" cholesterol because a high LDL level leads to a buildup of cholesterol in your arteries.

How do I know what my HDL level is?

A blood test [<https://medlineplus.gov/cholesterollevelswhatyouneedtoknow.html>] can measure your cholesterol levels, including HDL. When and how often you should get this test depends on your age, risk factors, and family history. The general recommendations are:

For people who are age 19 or younger::

- The first test should be between ages 9 to 11
- Children should have the test again every 5 years
- Some children may have this test starting at age 2 if there is a family history of high blood cholesterol, heart attack, or stroke

For people who are age 20 or older::

- Younger adults should have the test every 5 years
- Men ages 45 to 65 and women ages 55 to 65 should have it every 1 to 2 years

What should my HDL level be?

With HDL cholesterol, higher numbers are better, because a high HDL level can lower your risk for coronary artery disease and stroke [<https://medlineplus.gov/stroke.html>] . How high your HDL should be depends on your age and sex:

Group	Healthy HDL Level
Age 19 or younger	More than 45mg/dl

Group

Men age 20 or older

Women age 20 or older

Healthy HDL Level

More than 40mg/dl

More than 50mg/dl

How can I raise my HDL level?

If your HDL level is too low, lifestyle changes may help. These changes may also help prevent other diseases, and make you feel better overall:

- **Eat a healthy diet.** To raise your HDL level, you need to eat good fats instead of bad fats. This means limiting saturated fats, which include full-fat milk and cheese, high-fat meats like sausage and bacon, and foods made with butter, lard, and shortening. You should also avoid trans fats, which may be in some margarines, fried foods, and processed foods like baked goods. Instead, eat unsaturated fats, which are found in avocado, vegetable oils like olive oil, and nuts. Limit carbohydrates, especially sugar. Also try to eat more foods naturally high in fiber, such as oatmeal and beans.
- **Stay at a healthy weight.** You can boost your HDL level by losing weight, especially if you have lots of fat around your waist.
- **Exercise.** Getting regular exercise [<https://medlineplus.gov/howmuchexercisedoineed.html>] can raise your HDL level, as well as lower your LDL. You should try to do 30 minutes of moderate to vigorous aerobic exercise on most, if not all, days.
- **Avoid cigarettes.** Smoking [<https://medlineplus.gov/smoking.html>] and exposure to secondhand smoke [<https://medlineplus.gov/secondhandsmoke.html>] can lower your HDL level. If you are a smoker, ask your health care provider for help in finding the best way for you to quit [<https://medlineplus.gov/quittingsmoking.html>]. You should also try to avoid secondhand smoke.
- **Limit alcohol.** Moderate alcohol may lower your HDL level, although more studies are needed to confirm that. What we do know is that too much alcohol can make you gain weight, and that lowers your HDL level.

Some cholesterol medicines [<https://medlineplus.gov/cholesterolmedicines.html>], including certain statins [<https://medlineplus.gov/statins.html>], can raise your HDL level, in addition to lowering your LDL level. Health care providers don't usually prescribe medicines only to raise HDL. But if you have a low HDL and high LDL level, you might need medicine.

What else can affect my HDL level?




Taking certain medicines can lower HDL levels in some people. They include:

- Beta blockers, a type of blood pressure medicine [<https://medlineplus.gov/bloodpressuremedicines.html>]
- Anabolic steroids [<https://medlineplus.gov/anabolicsteroids.html>], including testosterone, a male hormone
- Progestins, which are female hormones that are in some birth control pills [<https://medlineplus.gov/birthcontrol.html>] and hormone replacement therapy [<https://medlineplus.gov/hormonereplacementtherapy.html>]
- Benzodiazepines, sedatives that are often used for anxiety and insomnia

If you are taking one of these and you have a very low HDL level, ask your provider if you should continue to take them.

Diabetes can also lower your HDL level, so that gives you another reason to manage your diabetes [<https://medlineplus.gov/diabetes.html>].

Learn More

- Cholesterol - what to ask your doctor [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000211.htm>] (Medical Encyclopedia)
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/patientinstructions/000211.htm>]
- Cholesterol Good and Bad [<https://medlineplus.gov/medlineplus-videos/cholesterol-good-and-bad/>]
  (National Library of Medicine)
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/videos-de-medlineplus/colesterol-bueno-y-colesterol-malo/>]
- Cholesterol Levels [<https://medlineplus.gov/lab-tests/cholesterol-levels/>]  (National Library of Medicine)
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/pruebas-de-laboratorio/niveles-de-colesterol/>]

Elevated HDL Cholesterol [<https://www.merckmanuals.com/home/hormonal-and-metabolic-disorders/cholesterol-disorders/elevated-hdl-cholesterol>] (Merck & Co., Inc.)

Also in Spanish [<https://www.merckmanuals.com/es-us/hogar/trastornos-hormonales-y-metab%C3%B3licos/trastornos-relacionados-con-el-colesterol/colesterol-hdl-elevado>]

- HDL Cholesterol: How to Boost Your 'Good' Cholesterol [<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/high-blood-cholesterol/in-depth/hdl-cholesterol/ART-20046388?p=1>] (Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.mayoclinic.org/es/diseases-conditions/high-blood-cholesterol/in-depth/hdl-cholesterol/art-20046388?p=1>]
- Niacin for cholesterol [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000788.htm>] (Medical Encyclopedia)
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/patientinstructions/000788.htm>]
- Niacin to Improve Cholesterol Numbers [<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/high-blood-cholesterol/in-depth/niacin/ART-20046208?p=1>] (Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.mayoclinic.org/es/diseases-conditions/high-blood-cholesterol/in-depth/niacin/art-20046208?p=1>]

Journal Articles

References and abstracts from MEDLINE/PubMed (National Library of Medicine)

- Article: Independent association of weight-adjusted waist index with asthma in U.S. adolescents:... [<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/40743247>]
- Article: High-Density Lipoprotein Cholesterol and Cognitive Function in Older Korean Adults Without... [<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/40732946>]
- Article: Association of outcome with non-high-density lipoprotein cholesterol to high-density lipoprotein cholesterol... [<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/40713645>]
- HDL: The "Good" Cholesterol -- see more articles [<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/?term=%22Cholesterol%2C+HDL%22%5Bmajr%3Anoexp%5D+AND+humans%5Bmh%5D+AND+english%5Bla%5D+AND+%22last+1+Year%22+%5Bedat%5D+NOT+%28letter%5Bpt%5D+OR+case+reports%5Bpt%5D+OR+editorial%5Bpt%5D+OR+comment%5Bpt%5D%29+AND+free+full+text%5Bsb%5D+>]

Patient Handouts

- Cholesterol testing and results [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000386.htm>] (Medical Encyclopedia)
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/patientinstructions/000386.htm>]



MEDICAL ENCYCLOPEDIA

HDL test [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/007810.htm>]

Related Health Topics

Cholesterol [<https://medlineplus.gov/cholesterol.html>]

Cholesterol Levels: What You Need to Know [<https://medlineplus.gov/cholesterollevelswhatyouneedtoknow.html>]

[Cholesterol Medicines \[https://medlineplus.gov/cholesterolmedicines.html\]](https://medlineplus.gov/cholesterolmedicines.html)

[Dietary Fats \[https://medlineplus.gov/dietaryfats.html\]](https://medlineplus.gov/dietaryfats.html)

[Heart Diseases \[https://medlineplus.gov/heartdiseases.html\]](https://medlineplus.gov/heartdiseases.html)

[How to Lower Cholesterol \[https://medlineplus.gov/howtolowercholesterol.html\]](https://medlineplus.gov/howtolowercholesterol.html)

[LDL: The "Bad" Cholesterol \[https://medlineplus.gov/ldlthebadcholesterol.html\]](https://medlineplus.gov/ldlthebadcholesterol.html)

[Nutrition \[https://medlineplus.gov/nutrition.html\]](https://medlineplus.gov/nutrition.html)

[Statins \[https://medlineplus.gov/statins.html\]](https://medlineplus.gov/statins.html)

[Triglycerides \[https://medlineplus.gov/triglycerides.html\]](https://medlineplus.gov/triglycerides.html)

National Institutes of Health

The primary NIH organization for research on *HDL: The "Good" Cholesterol* is the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute [<http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/>]

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