

# Ask the Pharmacist

## What you should know about cholesterol

Cholesterol is a waxy, fat-like substance that's found in all cells of the body. It has both good and bad effects on your overall health. Your body uses cholesterol to make hormones, vitamin D and substances that help you digest foods.

Too much cholesterol in the blood, or high blood cholesterol, can be serious. People with high blood cholesterol have a greater chance of getting heart disease. High blood cholesterol on its own does not cause symptoms, so many people are unaware that their cholesterol level is too high.

When your body has too much cholesterol, deposits of fat, called plaque, form inside blood vessel walls. The blood vessel walls thicken and become narrower (a condition called atherosclerosis). This change reduces blood flow through the blood vessels. Fatty plaques caused by high cholesterol can rupture, possibly leading to heart attacks or strokes.<sup>1</sup>

### What are your cholesterol numbers?

It's important to find out what your cholesterol levels are, because lowering cholesterol levels that are too high lessens your risk of developing heart disease. When you get your cholesterol checked, your healthcare provider will give you a number for your total cholesterol level.

- A total cholesterol level of less than 200 is considered desirable.
- A total cholesterol level of 200 to 239 is considered borderline high.
- A total cholesterol level of 240 or above is considered high.<sup>2</sup>

When your cholesterol is found to be high, your healthcare provider may also check the amount of LDL (low-density lipoprotein) and HDL (high-density lipoprotein) in your blood. LDL cholesterol is called bad cholesterol. HDL cholesterol is called good cholesterol. It's good to have low levels of LDL and high levels of HDL.

### Lowering your bad cholesterol

Eating right, exercising and not smoking can often control cholesterol levels. If you have a high risk for heart disease, your healthcare provider may prescribe cholesterol-lowering medication and recommend changes in lifestyle. Many cholesterol-lowering medications are available as generics. If your doctor recommends a cholesterol-lowering medication, ask about an available generic medication that may save you money. Here are some tips for lowering high cholesterol levels:

- Increase your dietary fiber by eating more fruits, vegetables and whole grains.
- Lose weight.
- Increase physical activity.

<sup>1</sup> National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute, "What Is Cholesterol?" Available at: [http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/dci/Diseases/Hbc/HBC\\_WhatIs.html](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/dci/Diseases/Hbc/HBC_WhatIs.html)

<sup>2</sup> National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute, "How Is High Blood Cholesterol Diagnosed?" Available at: [http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/dci/Diseases/Hbc/HBC\\_Diagnosis.html](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/dci/Diseases/Hbc/HBC_Diagnosis.html).