

What you need to know about cholesterol

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(HealthDay)—Cholesterol plays a vital role in your health, so it's important to understand the different types of cholesterol and how to influence their levels, a heart specialist says.

"Good cholesterol—high-density lipoprotein [HDL]—recycles cholesterol and fat in the body," said Dr. Alex Garton. He's a noninvasive cardiologist from PinnacleHealth CardioVascular Institute, based in central Pennsylvania.

"What we call bad cholesterol, low-density lipoprotein [LDL], is 'bad' because any leftover LDL is deposited into the [blood](#) vessels, increasing the risk of vascular disease. HDL can help prevent this by 'recycling' excess amounts of bad cholesterol," Garton explained in an institute news release.

Total cholesterol can be deceiving, so it's important to know the levels of both your [bad cholesterol](#) and [good cholesterol](#).

LDL levels should generally be kept below 130 milligrams per deciliter (mg/dL) of blood. But a level of 100 mg/dL is considered "optimal," the U.S. National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute says.

HDL levels should be above 40 mg/dL, the NHLBI says. And, levels above 60 mg/dL are even better.

But cholesterol levels are only part of the overall picture, Garton said.

"Smoking cigarettes, having high blood pressure or having a family history of early heart disease can also increase a patient's cholesterol-related risks. These factors actually lower the LDL cholesterol number that signifies a patient is at risk for heart disease," he said.

Other factors can increase the risk from lower LDL levels. These include diabetes, obesity and a family history of unhealthy cholesterol levels, Garton said.

The American Heart Association recommends all adults 20 and older

have their [cholesterol](#) and other traditional [heart](#) risk factors checked every four to six years, Garton said.

He noted that [high cholesterol](#) often causes no symptoms. That means regular screening is the best way to protect yourself.

More information: The American Heart Association has more on [cholesterol](#).

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