

# Understanding your cholesterol results

Cholesterol (also called lipids) is a type of fat that your body makes. We all need some cholesterol for important jobs like making hormones and cells. But we only need a small amount.

High levels of cholesterol can clog up your blood vessels, which can lead to heart attacks or strokes.

## What are normal levels?

There aren't normal levels of cholesterol for everyone. The levels you should aim for depend on how high your risk is of heart disease or having a stroke.

New Zealand health guidelines recommend these healthy cholesterol levels:

- total cholesterol – less than 4 mmol/L
- LDL cholesterol – less than 1.8 mmol/L
- HDL cholesterol – greater than 1 mmol/L
- triglycerides – less than 1.7 mmol/L
- total chol/HDL ratio – less than 4.

If you have heart disease or diabetes it's important to try to keep your cholesterol levels within these ranges. If you have an increased risk of developing heart disease or diabetes, your GP may talk to you about ways to get your cholesterol levels near to these ranges.

## What do the different terms mean?

**Total cholesterol:** This is the total amount of cholesterol in your blood.

**LDL:** This is often called bad cholesterol. It takes cholesterol from your liver to different parts of your body. When there's too much of it, cholesterol can build up on the inside of your blood vessels. This makes your blood vessels narrow.

**HDL:** This is often called good cholesterol. It actually removes cholesterol from your blood and tissues and takes it to the liver, which breaks it down and removes it from your body. If you have more of this type of cholesterol, you may have a lower risk of heart disease or stroke.

**Triglycerides:** These are the main type of fat that we eat. Having too much of these fats can lead to obesity (being overweight) and can increase your chance of having a heart attack or a stroke.

**Total cholesterol/HDL ratio:** This is a calculation used to figure out your risk of stroke and heart attack. The lower the number, the lower your risk.





### What does it mean if my results are too high?

If you have high cholesterol but don't have any other risks for heart disease or stroke, it isn't usually something to worry about. But your GP or practice nurse may recommend you make some changes to your lifestyle. They'll probably suggest you eat less saturated fat (mostly this is animal fat) and become more physically active.

If you have very high cholesterol, your GP will want to talk to you about the options for treating this.

Stopping smoking and cutting down on alcohol and sugar can also help to lower your cholesterol levels.

### What happens next?

If these lifestyle changes don't decrease your cholesterol levels, or if your risk of a heart attack or stroke is moderately high, your GP may recommend you take a tablet called a statin. Statins reduce your cholesterol levels and reduce the chance of you having a heart attack or stroke.

You can read more about high cholesterol, high triglycerides, and healthy eating and weight. Talk to your GP or practice nurse for more advice about high cholesterol, a healthier lifestyle, and whether you should repeat the blood test.

*Written by HealthInfo clinical advisers. Last reviewed May 2018.*