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Government Employees  
Medical Scheme

# Cholesterol

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What is cholesterol?	1
Why is LDL cholesterol dangerous?	1
What causes high cholesterol?	2
How will you know if you have high cholesterol?	3
Controlling cholesterol	3

## CHOLESTEROL GUIDELINE

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### WHAT IS CHOLESTEROL?

The body normally maintains a certain amount of cholesterol in order to digest fats, produce hormones and build cell walls.

Cholesterol is a fatty substance produced by the liver and is found in two forms in the body, HDL (High Density Lipoprotein) and LDL (Low Density Lipoprotein).

HDL is also called 'good cholesterol' because it clears excess cholesterol from the blood back to the liver. Low HDL levels increase a person's risk for heart disease.

LDL, or 'bad cholesterol', is dangerous to the body because it damages artery walls and can lead to a stroke or heart attack.

### WHY IS LDL CHOLESTEROL DANGEROUS?

LDL lines the artery walls to form a fatty 'plaque'. The coronary arteries (arteries supplying blood to the heart) are most vulnerable.

As this plaque lining thickens over time, the arteries are narrowed and the heart receives less blood and becomes starved of oxygen, which can lead to severe chest pain, heart disease and heart attack.

Narrowed arteries also encourage the formation of blood clots which enter the blood stream and can cause blockage of arteries or pass through the heart.

High cholesterol also puts a person at increased risk of suffering from a stroke and sustaining permanent brain damage.

## WHAT CAUSES HIGH CHOLESTEROL?

High cholesterol is most frequently linked to a person's diet and lifestyle. However, there are many other factors that contribute to the risk of developing high cholesterol.

- **Family history of high cholesterol sufferers** – medical history and ethnicity are linked to high cholesterol, with Caucasian people being at greater risk than Black people. Asians are also known to be at high risk with increased cholesterol.
- **Age** – cholesterol levels steadily increase in persons between 20 and 65, and thereafter may decrease again or remain at a certain level.
- **Gender** – women generally have higher HDL levels than men and are less likely to develop heart disease, but as they reach menopause the LDL levels increase to equal that of men.
- **Diet** – foods that are high in saturated fats and kilojoules have a significant impact on blood cholesterol levels.
- **Being overweight or obese** as a result of bad eating habits puts a person at greater risk of developing high blood cholesterol levels.
- **Physical inactivity** – HDL levels increase with exercise, whereas LDL levels increase when the body is inactive.
- **Smoking**
- **Stress**
- **Excessive alcohol intake**



## HOW WILL YOU KNOW IF YOU HAVE HIGH CHOLESTEROL?

A person with high cholesterol will not show any symptoms or signs of the problem. High cholesterol is often only detected when the person has a heart attack or stroke, and when permanent organ damage has already set in.

*The best way to know if you have high cholesterol is to have it checked by a qualified healthcare provider.*

Persons over the age of 20 are advised to have their cholesterol levels checked at least once every five years.

More frequent check-ups may be required depending on the risk factors involved and recommendations of the healthcare provider.

## CONTROLLING CHOLESTEROL

Cholesterol levels can be effectively controlled through regular physical activity and healthy eating. In more serious cases, medication can be prescribed by a healthcare provider.

### **Reduce the amount of saturated fat and cholesterol in your diet**

Ideally, a person should not consume more than 200mg of dietary cholesterol per day. Include more low cholesterol foods in your diet such as lean meat, fish, skinless poultry, whole grains foods, fruit and vegetables. Foods high in cholesterol should be kept to a minimum or eliminated, such as liver, egg yolks and full-fat dairy products.

### **Maintain a healthy weight**

Being overweight or obese is a risk factor for heart disease and raises cholesterol levels. By losing weight you will automatically lower the LDL cholesterol level as well as total cholesterol levels.

### **Regular physical activity**

Physical inactivity is a risk factor for heart disease. Regular exercise lowers LDL levels while raising HDL levels, and helps you achieve and maintain a healthy weight.

Ideally, a person should do 30 minutes of exercise per day. If you are physically inactive but want to start exercising, start with five minutes moderate exercise a day (such as taking a brisk walk or climbing stairs), and gradually increase intensity and duration.

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