Let's Talk About Cholesterol: The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly

Are you thinking about your cholesterol levels?

Are you wondering how your cholesterol levels affects the health of your heart?

Of course you are. Let's take a closer look at the relationship between your cholesterol and your heart.

What Exactly is Cholesterol and Where Does It Come From?

Cholesterol is a waxy, natural substance that normally circulates throughout your body.

Cholesterol joins with other natural substances to form plaque. Plaque is an accumulation of fatty deposits (cholesterol, fat, calcium, and fibrin, a clotting material).

Cholesterol comes from two sources: your liver and the food you eat.

Liver Cholesterol: Your liver makes all the necessary cholesterol your body needs.

Food (Dietary) Cholesterol: Extra cholesterol in your body comes from animal food. For example, red meat, some poultry, and full-fat dairy products may contain cholesterol.

What Is the Good Cholesterol?

The good cholesterol is called high-density lipoprotein (**HDL**) cholesterol. Your body needs HDL cholesterol to build cells, so you'll want to keep your HDL blood levels **high.**

What Is the Bad Cholesterol?

The bad cholesterol is called low-density lipoprotein (**LDL**) cholesterol. Your body only needs a small amount of this type of cholesterol, so you'll want to keep your LDL blood levels **low.**

And What Is the Ugly Part?

The ugly part is when your **LDL** (bad) blood cholesterol levels are too high, according to the American Heart Association (AHA). High **LDL** cholesterol levels can increase your risk of major health problems, including heart attack, stroke, and peripheral (arm and leg) artery disease.

Major Health Problems That May Result From High Cholesterol Levels

1. Your Liver Works Overtime After You Eat High-Fat Foods

Animal and dairy foods high in cholesterol are often high in saturated and trans fats.

Those saturated and trans fats can trigger your liver to make much more cholesterol than your body needs.

In addition, some tropical oils, such as palm oil, palm kernel oil, and coconut oil (often found in commercial baked goods) can also cause your liver to produce excess cholesterol.

This extra (and unnecessary) cholesterol production increases your blood cholesterol levels.

2. Cholesterol and Plaque Can Narrow and Harden Major Heart Arteries

Over time, your cholesterol levels may increase, and plaque can build up in the inner walls of the major arteries that feed your heart.

As plaque builds up inside the arteries of your heart, the blood vessels narrow and harden. This restricts oxygen-rich blood from reaching your heart and lungs and may result in coronary artery disease, or atherosclerosis.

Coronary artery disease likely increases your risk of a heart attack.

3. Cholesterol and Plaque Can Build Up in Other Major Arteries

Other major arteries in your body can also be affected by cholesterol and plaque build-up.

Peripheral (Arm and Leg) Artery Disease

Plaque build-up in your major arm, leg, or pelvic arteries may result in narrow, hardened blood vessels. This condition is called peripheral artery disease.

Oxygen-rich blood may not be able to reach your extremities (arms, hands, lower legs, or feet), and can result in pain, skin color changes, and ulcers. Left untreated, this can result in tissue death, gangrene, and loss of a limb.

If you have other risk factors such as smoking, high blood pressure, or diabetes, your risk of peripheral artery disease is even higher.

Carotid (Neck) Artery Disease

Plaque build-up in your neck arteries (carotid arteries), may result in narrowing, or stenosis of these blood vessels. This is known as carotid artery stenosis.

As the blood vessels in your neck narrow and harden, oxygen-rich blood is prevented from reaching your brain.

This narrowing or blockage can result in a major stroke, or an event called a transient ischemic attack (TIA), which is a temporary "warning stroke".

4. Plaque Can Break Off, Travel, or Form Clots

Plaque doesn't just stay inactive inside the walls of your arteries. Plaque can break off and travel around your bloodstream until it gets trapped and forms a clot.

Similar to plaque build-up, clots in your arteries can prevent oxygen-rich blood from reaching your vital organs and limbs.

A heart attack can occur when a blood clot forms in your heart's arteries, blocking blood flow to your heart.

When a blood clot occurs in your neck (carotid) arteries, blocking blood flow toward your brain, you could experience a stroke.

When a blood clot develops in your leg, restricting blood flow below the clot to your foot, you risk losing your leg or foot.

Managing Your Cholesterol: Check, Change, Control

- **Check** your blood cholesterol levels regularly. Your doctor may order a detailed blood test (called a lipid profile) to look at your different types of cholesterol levels.

- **Change** your diet and lifestyle to help you improve (lower) your cholesterol levels. Talk to your doctor about what specific actions you can take to do this.

- **Control** your cholesterol levels for life with these diet and lifestyle changes. Talk to your doctor about how to get started. You could also look at the American Heart Association guidelines (www.heart.org) for additional suggestions on maintaining these changes.

What About Cholesterol-Lowering Medications?

Your physician may prescribe several **medications** to help you achieve your cholesterol goals. You may have heard a lot about statins, but several different types of LDL-lowering medications exist.

Some of these medications target specific functions or activity areas. These medications can enhance your body's ability to significantly lower cholesterol levels, and are used alongside diet and lifestyle management.

Be Smart About Your Heart!

There is so much to learn about cholesterol, and this is a well-studied, fast-changing body of knowledge.

Check out the **American Heart Association website (www.heart.org)** for more information about managing your cholesterol levels, diet, medications, and lifestyle changes.