



Triglycerides: the henchman of cholesterol

By Fred J. Reed, MD, Lincoln Hospital & NBMC



Cholesterol is simply this – fats in the blood. While it's true the American Heart Association recommends an overall cholesterol number below 200 to lower heart attack risk, breaking that number down even further by the *type* of cholesterol can give you a better idea of your true likelihood of a blockage or clot.

Total cholesterol is made up of three kinds of fats: Low Density Lipoproteins (LDL), High Density Lipoproteins (HDL) and Triglycerides – the henchman of heart disease.

HDLs (good cholesterol) -- These fats are the vacuum cleaners of the lipid world. They attach to bad cholesterol (LDLs and triglycerides) and clean them out of the blood before they become a blockage. The higher the HDL the better! If your HDL numbers are low, the only way to bring them up is with exercise.

LDLs (bad cholesterol) -- When too much LDL cholesterol circulates in the blood, it slowly builds up in the inner walls of the arteries that feed the heart and brain. Together with triglycerides, LDLs can form plaque, a thick, hard deposit that can narrow the arteries and make them less flexible (atherosclerosis – hardening of the arteries). Keep these low.

Triglycerides (even worse cholesterol) -- Known as the “artery clogger”, it is the most dangerous because it is the largest and most likely to bond with other cholesterol to cause a blockage in an artery. Being overweight, poorly controlled diabetes, underactive thyroid, kidney disease, regularly eating more calories than you burn and heredity can cause high triglycerides.

Where does cholesterol come from?

Contrary to popular belief, **cholesterol is found only in animal products such as meat, dairy, lard and eggs.** Lincoln Hospital Dietitian Irene Rapp likes to say that, “If it has a mother, it has cholesterol.” Because of food processing, cholesterol is found in many products like baked goods, pasta, sauces – anything that meat, eggs or dairy is added to, so read labels. Anything under 20 mg cholesterol is considered a low cholesterol product.

Fruits, vegetables, beans, nuts (even peanut butter) and whole grains **do not have cholesterol** – one of the reasons we urge people to eat more servings of these foods for heart health.

What is considered too high?

You can have an overall cholesterol number around 200 and still have out-of-control triglycerides. Triglycerides over 200 are considered high and 500+ is the real danger zone. Consult your healthcare provider to make a plan to bring your triglyceride levels down. Medication may be needed along with changes to your eating and exercise habits. Changes like these...

- Lose weight.
- Cut down on meats with high fat content (beef, some pork). Substitute fish high in Omega 3 fatty acids (mackerel, herring, sardines, Albacore tuna, salmon) or lean poultry with the skin off. Remember that dark turkey and chicken meat is higher in fat and cholesterol than white meat.
- Reduce fat and cholesterol in your diet. Choose fat-free or low fat dairy and broth products and avoid all fried foods. Use “better” fats in cooking such as olive or canola oil.
- Reduce your alcohol intake considerably. Even small amounts of alcohol affect triglyceride levels.
- Exercise at least 30 minutes per day – 60 is even better. Walking at 3.5 mph for 3 miles a day is a good goal to shoot for and has been found to add about seven years to your lifespan. It only takes an hour. If you don't have one hour, break it up. Walk ½ hour in the morning and ½ hour at night.
- Keep control of your blood pressure.
- Stop smoking.

If levels don't come down after making these changes, talk to your doctor about medications that might help. To be proactive with your heart health, I urge everyone to know their cholesterol numbers. If you are in the borderline range you should have your cholesterol levels checked annually.

To get the big picture about your cardiovascular health, Lincoln Hospital and North Basin Medical Clinics offer low cost blood tests twice a year at the annual Spring & Fall Check Up & Blood Draws. For more information on times and dates, look on our website under “Programs.”

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