

Chest  
Heart &  
Stroke  
Scotland



# CHOLESTEROL



ESSENTIAL GUIDE

# This Essential Guide is about cholesterol.

**It explains:**

- What cholesterol is
- The difference between good and bad cholesterol
- Why too much bad cholesterol is harmful
- What you can do to reduce your cholesterol level if it is too high

# What is cholesterol?

Cholesterol is a fatty, waxy substance mainly produced in your liver. It is also found in some foods like red meat and full-fat dairy products.

Your body needs cholesterol to help make cells. Cholesterol is also needed for digestion and helps to make important hormones and vitamin D.

There are two types of cholesterol – one is **good** and the other is **bad**.

To be carried around the body, cholesterol joins with proteins in your blood. When good cholesterol combines with protein it is called high-density lipoprotein (HDL). When bad cholesterol combines with protein it is called low-density lipoprotein (LDL).

# Good cholesterol and bad cholesterol

Good cholesterol is good because it helps to break down and recycle or get rid of your bad cholesterol.

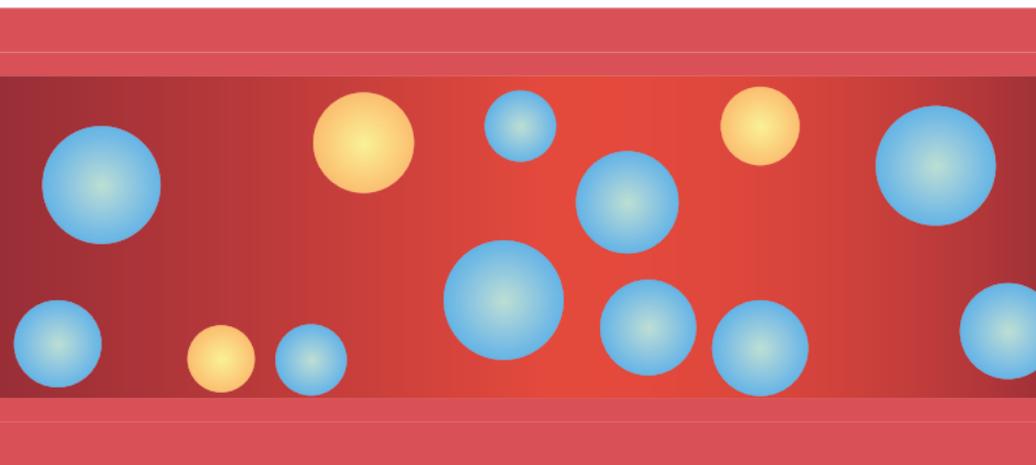
Bad cholesterol is bad because too much of it can cause fatty patches to build up along the walls of your arteries. These patches can cause your arteries to become narrow or blocked. This makes it difficult for your arteries to carry blood around your body. Depending on which arteries are affected, this can lead to a heart attack or stroke.

To reduce your risk of serious health problems, you should have a low level of bad cholesterol in your blood and a higher level of good cholesterol.

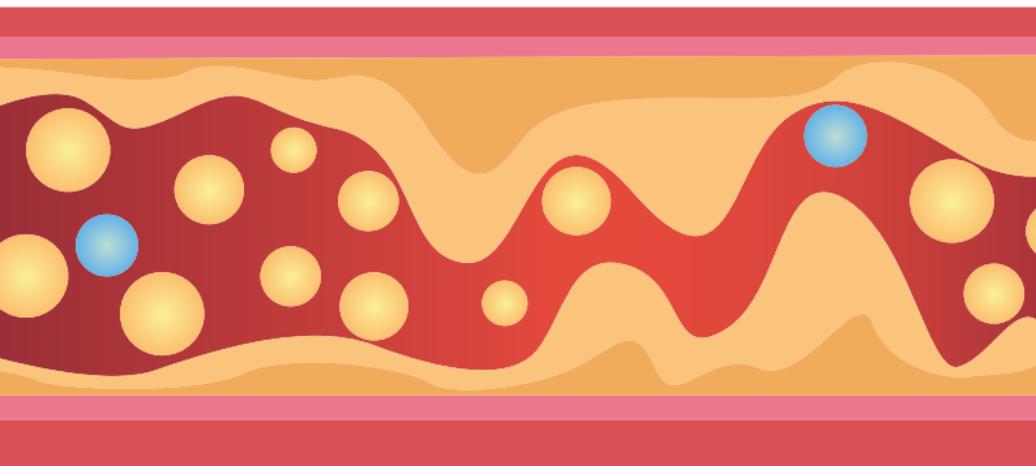
● HDL Cholesterol (**Good**)

● LDL Cholesterol (**Bad**)

Normal Artery



Narrowed Artery



# What causes too much bad cholesterol?

Some people naturally produce too much cholesterol. This is more common if there is a family history of high cholesterol.

Good and bad cholesterol is also found in food. Good cholesterol comes from things like eggs, liver and fish. Bad cholesterol comes from foods that are high in saturated fat. These include fatty meats, dairy products, palm and coconut oil and processed foods. Eating too much of these kinds of foods can result in high levels of bad cholesterol.



# How do I know if I have high cholesterol?

If your doctor is concerned about your cholesterol level you will need a blood test. This measures the levels of good and bad cholesterol and other fatty substances (triglycerides) in your blood.

The doctor will also look at information on other risk factors like your age, sex, weight, blood pressure, ethnicity, family history and if you smoke. Together with the blood test results, this information is used to tell you if you are at a low, medium or high risk of heart disease or stroke.



# Medication

If you have high cholesterol your doctor may prescribe you a medicine called statins. Statins work by reducing the amount of cholesterol made by your liver.

If your cholesterol levels are normal, you may still be at risk of developing heart problems or having a stroke. If this is the case, your doctor may recommend you take medication to help lower your risk.



# Taking action

If you need to reduce your cholesterol, the good news is that there are lots of things you can do to help.

## 1 Eat Well



The most important thing you can do is to cut down on foods high in saturated fat. These include fatty meats, full-fat dairy products, oils, cakes, hard cheeses and processed foods.



Aim to eat at least 5 portions of different fruit and vegetables each day.



Try baking, boiling and grilling instead of frying.



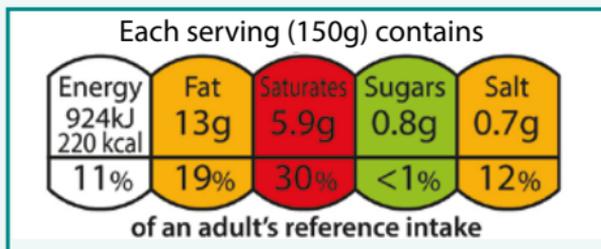
Eat plenty of fibre. Fibre is found in fruit and vegetables, beans, lentils, wholemeal bread, wholegrain cereals, oats and barley.



Swap foods that are high in saturated fats for foods that are low in saturated fats like fish, nuts, olive oil and lean meat such as chicken.

Lots of packaged foods have a colour-coded 'traffic light' nutrition label. This helps you to choose foods low in saturated fat, salt and sugar. The values are per serving or per 100g of the food.

**Check the label** and aim to eat more foods that are colour-coded green or amber.



## 2 Be Active



Aim for at least 150 minutes of moderate physical activity a week. For example, 30 minutes on 5 or more days, or a few sessions each day of 10 minutes at a time.



Choose activities you enjoy such as walking, gardening, swimming, yoga or dancing.



Aim to do strength exercises on 2 or more days a week. Things like carrying your shopping count.

## 3 Stop Smoking

Smoking increases the level of bad cholesterol in your blood and lowers the level of good cholesterol.

Smoking also increases your risk of heart disease and stroke, damages your lungs and increases your risk of many cancers.

There is lots of free support to help you stop smoking. Ask your doctor, nurse or pharmacist for information or call **Quit Your Way Scotland** on **0800 84 84 84**.



## 4 Be Alcohol Aware



Alcohol increases the level of bad cholesterol in your blood.

To keep health risks from alcohol to a low level it is safest not to drink more than 14 units a week on a regular basis.

If you do drink as much as 14 units a week, spread them out over 3 or more days.

One unit is the same as:



218ml

Standard  
4.5% cider



76ml

Standard  
13% wine



25ml

Standard  
40% whisky



250ml

Standard  
4% beer



250ml

Standard  
4% alcopop

For advice on how to reduce your alcohol intake go to **[www.drinkaware.co.uk](http://www.drinkaware.co.uk)** or phone Drinkline for free on **0300 123 1110**.

# Myths and Facts

 Using margarine instead of butter helps to lower cholesterol - **MYTH**

 Margarine contains trans-fats which can increase the level of bad cholesterol in your blood - **FACT**

 Only older people have high cholesterol levels - **MYTH**

 Anyone can have high cholesterol – it does not matter how old they are. This is especially true if you have a family history of heart disease - **FACT**

 Only overweight people have high cholesterol - **MYTH**

 You can be a healthy weight and still have a high cholesterol level - **FACT**

 I feel fine so my cholesterol level must be OK - **MYTH**

 High cholesterol often has no obvious symptoms. Some people don't know they have anything wrong with them until they have a heart attack or stroke. It is important to have regular check-ups with your nurse or doctor - **FACT**

Our publications are available for free to anyone in Scotland who needs them. Go to **[www.chss.org.uk/publications](http://www.chss.org.uk/publications)** for all our resources, including other Essential Guides in this series.

For free, confidential advice and support from our **Advice Line nurses**, call: 0808 801 0899 (Mon-Fri 9.30am-4pm), text: NURSE to 66777 or email: [advice@chss.org.uk](mailto:advice@chss.org.uk).

Across Scotland, over one million people – that's one in five of us – are living with the effects of a chest, heart or stroke condition. We are here to help everyone who needs us. But we need your support to do this. Go to **[www.chss.org.uk/supportus](http://www.chss.org.uk/supportus)** to find out how you can help more people in Scotland.

**If you would like this resource in an alternative format, please contact our Advice Line nurses.**

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