Bilbrook Medical Centre : All about Cholesterol

What is cholesterol?

Cholesterol is a fatty substance found in your blood.

It is produced in the liver and carried around your body by proteins called lipoproteins.

We all need cholesterol in the right amounts to stay healthy because our cells use it and it is also needed for producing hormones.

However too much cholesterol can cause build up of a fatty material inside the walls of our blood vessels. This can increase our risk of heart and circulatory disease such as heart attacks, stroke and vascular dementia.

What makes up cholesterol?

* High density lipoproteins (HDL) or “good cholesterol”. This transports cholesterol to the liver to be broken down (removing cholesterol from your blood)
* Non-high-density lipoproteins (non-HDL) or “bad cholesterol”. (This was previously known as LDL).

Too much of this type can cause fatty material to build up in your artery walls. These arteries can then narrow or get blocked up stopping blood from reaching important organs. This could lead to a heart attack or stroke.

* Triglycerides. This is another type of fat in our blood which is stored in fat cells. High triglycerides are more common if you are overweight, eat a lot of fatty or sugary foods or drink too much alcohol.

How is cholesterol measured?

A simple blood test will check levels of good (HDL) and bad (non-HDL) cholesterol and triglycerides, as well as getting a total cholesterol result.

For a healthy heart we are aiming for a high level of HDL cholesterol compared with a low level of non-HDL cholesterol.

It is important to know that there is no specific target cholesterol because your doctor is looking at your overall risk of developing heart and circulatory disease.

As well as a high cholesterol level other risk factors include:

* Smoking
* Raised blood pressure
* Being physically inactive
* Being overweight
* Having diabetes
* Family history of heart disease at an early age
* Being of South Asian origin

What causes high cholesterol?

Your genetics can influence your cholesterol, some cholesterol can be inherited.

Eating a diet high in saturated fats or trans fats.

Lifestyle factors such as smoking, being sedentary, being overweight (especially around your middle) and high alcohol intake.

How can I lower my cholesterol?

Take a look at our top tips at the end of this guide as well as some great resources to help you on your way

How do I know which fats to avoid and which are good for me?

A diet high in saturated fats or trans fats can lead to high cholesterol levels

**Saturated fats** are mainly found in animal products such as butter, cream, full fat dairy and the fat on meat. They can also be high in processed foods such as cakes, biscuits and ready-made meals

**Trans fats** may be found in many processed foods, especially meats

Fats from plants, vegetable and oily fish sources are called **polyunsaturated** and **monounsaturated fats**. These fats are much better for you and can help reduce your levels of bad cholesterol. Examples are olive oil, rapeseed oil, avocado, salmon and some nuts.

It is widely accepted that the healthiest diet is the Mediterranean diet which is higher in the healthy polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats.

<https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/what-is-a-mediterranean-diet/>

Will I need medication for my cholesterol?

You might do.

Your clinician will work out something called your Qrisk.

This takes into account other risk factors alongside your cholesterol result to give an estimate of the risk of developing heart disease in the next 10 years.

If lifestyle changes alone do not reduce your cholesterol enough your doctor may recommend a statin

Take a look at the following patient decision making tool to help you understand your Qrisk and the potential impact of taking a statin

<https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg181/resources/patient-decision-aid-pdf-243780159>

And finally.....

Bilbrook Medical Centre’s top tips for cholesterol

1. Aim to make lifestyle changes that improve your heart and circulatory health (try creating achievable small healthy habits)
2. Stop smoking
3. Eat a healthy balanced diet, low in saturated and trans fat, with as little processed food as possible (cooking from scratch is a great way to do this)
4. Include some good fats in your diet
5. Get active
6. Lose weight if you need to

Useful resources:

British Heart Foundation <https://www.bhf.org.uk/>

Heart UK <https://www.heartuk.org.uk/>

NHS <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/high-cholesterol/>

Heart healthy recipes

<https://www.bbcgoodfood.com/recipes/collection/heart-healthy-recipes>

