

- Heart diseases

ARE YOU AT RISK OF HEART DISEASE?

High cholesterol affects people of all ages, including those who are active and feel healthy. Early detection is key. It takes a simple blood test to find out if you are at high risk of heart disease.

The Philippine Star · 3 Jan 2023 · C6 · CLAUDIA BERMUDEZ-HYUN guest columnist

I religiously do a full medical checkup every six months. Yes, perhaps it's a bit of overkill but it gives me peace of mind, which is priceless. So much can happen in one's body in 12 months. Lately, I have been watching my cholesterol levels shift, despite the fact that my diet and weight have remained fairly constant for years.



It turns out cholesterol can be affected not only by the foods we eat but other conditions, such as thyroid imbalance, lack of exercise, smoking, high alcohol intake, and stress. These are some of the triggers that alter our levels of lipoproteins, round particles made of fat and proteins that travel in the bloodstream to cells throughout our body. Both cholesterol and triglycerides are lipids found in lipoproteins.

Awareness is the first step to understanding the risk of high cholesterol; a blood test would be the second step.

Why is high cholesterol considered a “silent killer”?

For starters, high cholesterol has no obvious symptoms. It's sneaky and silent and is only detectable through blood tests. You won't start to feel any symptoms until high cholesterol causes other problems in your body. You could have higher than normal lipids in your blood and not know about it for decades. Also, it does not follow a real stereotype: a 120-pound, 5'3" woman can have a high cholesterol count of 260, while an overweight woman's numbers can fall within the normal range. You could be a marathon runner and have high cholesterol.

What exactly is cholesterol?

Cholesterol is a waxy substance found in your blood. It is necessary to build healthy cells, but high levels of it can increase your risk of heart disease. The liver is the main organ in charge of producing all the cholesterol your body needs.

Cholesterol, as well as other fats, are

carried in your bloodstream as spherical particles called lipoproteins. The two most commonly known lipoproteins are low-density lipoproteins (LDL) and high-density lipoproteins (HDL).

This is how it all works: if your cholesterol levels are high, you can develop fatty deposits in your blood vessels, which eventually will grow, making it difficult for enough blood to flow through your arteries freely. Sometimes, these deposits — also called plaque — can suddenly break off and form a clot that could potentially cause a heart attack or stroke. Either of these could be fatal, which is why knowing your cholesterol levels is so important.

In some cases, high cholesterol can be an inherited trait, but more often than not it's the result of unhealthy lifestyle choices which, on the bright side, makes it preventable and treatable.

According to [Hopkinsmedicine.org](https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org), healthy adults should be in these ranges:

- Total cholesterol: below 200 mg/dL
 - LDL cholesterol (bad cholesterol): should be less than 100 mg/dL, or below 70 mg/dL for people with existing heart disease or diabetes
 - HDL cholesterol (good cholesterol): should be less than 40 mg/dL or higher for men, 50 mg/dL or higher for women. Having more HDL, or “good” cholesterol, in the blood may reduce the risk of a heart attack or stroke.
 - Triglycerides: less than 150 mg/dL
- Stress and cholesterol
Feeling under pressure can raise your cholesterol, but chronic stress is another story. If you are in a state of anxiety which is constant and lasts for a long period of time, your stress hormones and levels of cortisol will remain at high levels, creating a dangerous strain on your heart and other parts of your body.

“Under stress, cortisol delivers glucose to the body to help the fight-or-flight mechanism function properly.

If cortisol is consistently doing this, blood-sugar levels remain constantly at a high, which can lead to not only hypo/hyperglycaemia and diabetes but also elevated cholesterol levels,” says Dr. Inna Topiler, a New York certified clinical nutritionist.

Lifestyle changes are important for managing both high cholesterol and high blood pressure. Some lifestyle changes should include:

Eating less saturated fat and trans-fat. Fast foods contain high amounts of both. But many other foods can be high in saturated fat depending on how they're cooked.

Consuming fewer fried and processed foods. These include pre-packaged desserts and snacks.

Reducing sodium, or salt. Some foods have hidden salt so it's important to read labels.

Stop smoking and using tobacco products. Smoking is a leading risk factor for heart disease and blood vessel problems

Decrease your intake of alcoholic beverages. Alcohol raises the triglycerides and cholesterol in your blood. If your triglyceride levels become too high, they can build up in the liver, causing fatty liver disease. The liver can't work as well as it should and can't remove cholesterol from your blood, so your cholesterol levels will be affected.

Exercise more. Find a way to work on your cardio at least four days a week. This has many benefits not only for your heart but also for your emotional well-being, by producing feel-good endorphins that relieve stress.

Keep stress levels under control. Use meditation and breath to stay centered. Pranayama breathing and guided meditations can help you disconnect and reboot at any time of the day.

There is a possibility your doctor might recommend a statin medication to help lower your cholesterol. They work efficiently by slowing down the liver's production of cholesterol and lowering the LDL. They also can increase the liver's ability to remove bad cholesterol already in the blood. They have mild side effects, one of them being muscle cramps and joint pain but otherwise, they are well tolerated by most. Well-known statins are Lipitor, Crestor and Zocor. People with other medical conditions will need a more complex approach. Consult with your doctor about your medical history, family history and lifestyle factors. Together, you'll figure out the best plan that suits you.

Remember that even the best plans require time to work. Take things one step at a time, and understand that having high cholesterol isn't a personal failure. It's a result of many small changes quietly happening inside your body as you age.

Take control of what you can, and know that supplements (such as niacin, oats, fish oils, phytosterols and red rice yeast) and prescribed medications are there to help you fill in the gaps.

High cholesterol affects people of all ages, including those who are active and feel healthy. Take responsibility for your health.

Early detection is key. It takes a simple blood test to find out if you are at high risk of heart disease.