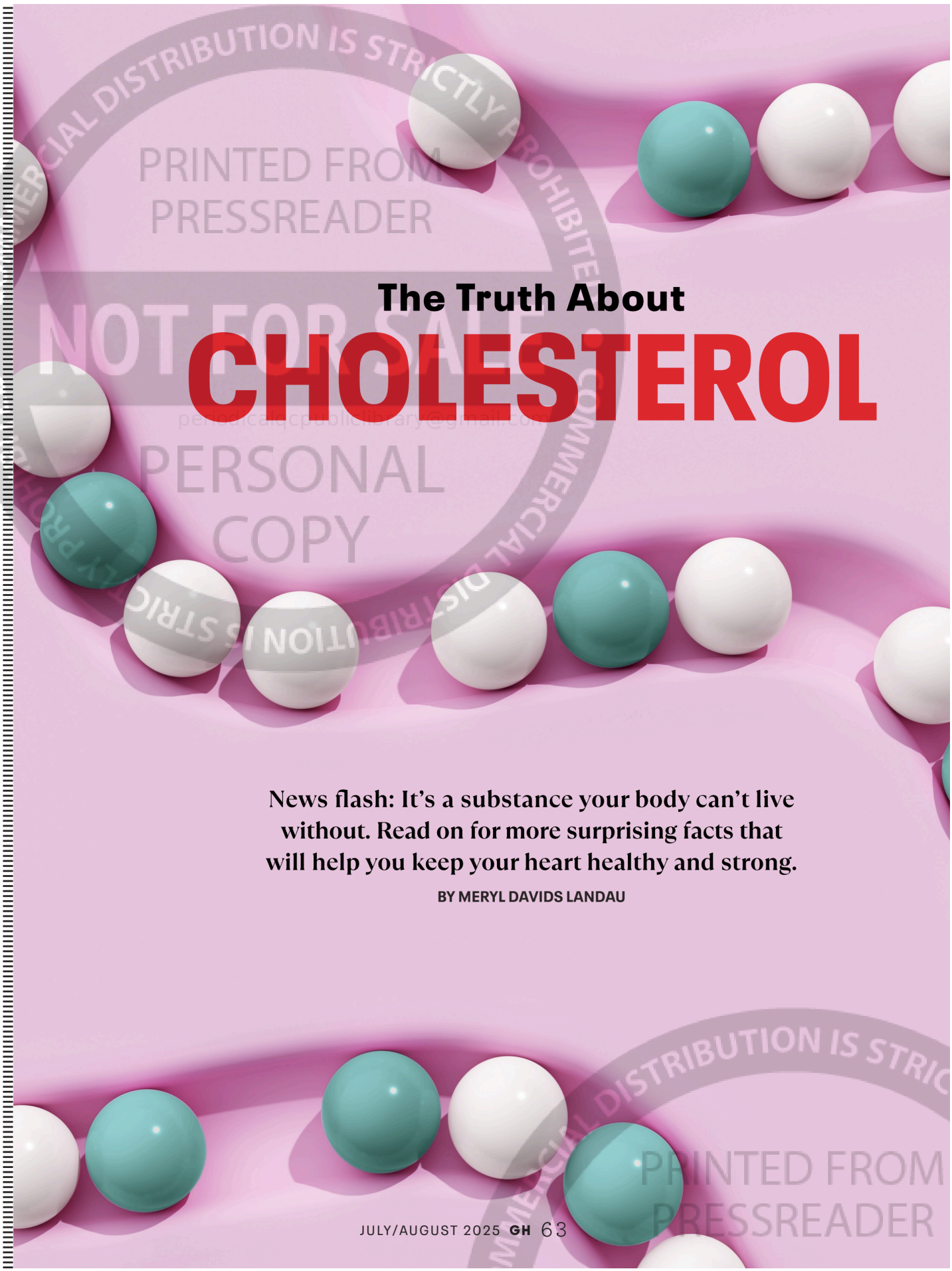
- Cholesterol



The Truth About CHOLESTEROL

News flash: It's a substance your body can't live without. Read on for more surprising facts that will help you keep your heart healthy and strong.

BY MERYL DAVIDS LANDAU

Getty Images (balls in tracks).

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If your doctor has said your cholesterol is too high, join the club: About a third of American adults and 7% of kids have levels that are higher than ideal. And if social media influencers saying there's no need to lower your cholesterol have created a tug-of-war in your head, you've got a lot of company. Here, experts offer the research-backed info you need to know to keep your cholesterol in check.



TRUE OR FALSE?

Cholesterol is super important for the brain and the body.

TRUE

The adult body has some 30 trillion cells, and every one needs cholesterol to maintain its shape and function. The body naturally produces this waxy substance and uses it to manufacture important hormones and vitamin D. Cholesterol also assists cells in our brains.

The substance is so necessary that even calling LDL "bad" cholesterol is a misnomer, says Stephen Kopecky, M.D., a preventive cardiologist at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, MN, and the author of *Live Younger Longer*. All forms of cholesterol are important for your cells, so "if you didn't have LDL, you'd be dead," he says.

TRUE OR FALSE?

The dangers of high blood cholesterol are overblown.

FALSE

Excess cholesterol accumulates in artery walls, and these hardened deposits (called plaque) can cause blockages or rupture and stop blood from reaching the brain or the heart, triggering a stroke or a heart attack. "Our arteries were not made to be storage receptacles for cholesterol," says Dr. Kopecky. When the body notices that there's too much, it fights back with inflammation, which ultimately damages arteries.

Posts on Instagram and YouTube claiming that it's fine to have total blood cholesterol levels of 300 mg/dL or higher are simply wrong, says Dr. Kopecky. Studies over many decades have confirmed that people with high cholesterol who lower it significantly have fewer heart attacks and strokes and are less likely to die from cardiovascular disease than those who don't.

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TRUE OR FALSE?

Lowering cholesterol triggers other health problems.

MOSTLY FALSE

Before statins were approved in the 1980s, some scientists saw low cholesterol linked to health issues like depression, cancer, cognitive decline and diabetes. But more recent and better-quality studies have not shown this. "Concerns that very low cholesterol can be harmful are not supported by rigorous scientific data," says Laurence Sperling, M.D., a preventive cardiologist and the founder of Emory University's Center for Heart Disease Prevention.

Cholesterol medicines are not totally risk-free, however. Like any drug, they can have side effects, especially muscle pain or weakness (which may be improved by changing brands or taking a supplement of coenzyme Q10). Kidney and liver problems have also occurred, though rarely.

One concern that's legit: People who take statins have a modestly greater likelihood of receiving a diabetes diagnosis, but this occurs primarily in people whose glucose levels were already borderline high. Rather than being a signal to avoid statins, "it's a reason to intensify efforts to focus on diabetes and heart disease prevention in a higher-risk population," says Dr. Sperling.

You want to be Goldilocks: "There's a sweet spot; you don't want cholesterol too high or too low," Dr. Kopecky says. Guidelines from the American Heart Association (AHA) recommend that people with a history of heart attack or stroke who are on a cholesterol-lowering medication aim to at least halve their LDL levels to get to 70 mg/dL or lower, while Dr. Kopecky advises those who already have heart disease to get theirs into the 25 mg/dL to 50 mg/dL range.

TRUE OR FALSE?

Too many people take statin drugs.

FALSE, BUT WITH CAVEATS

Most doctors use a risk calculator to determine your 10-year odds of developing heart disease. Based in part on that assessment, they decide whether you should take medication for elevated cholesterol.

But two years ago, the AHA made its calculator more

CREATED BY GH FOR Cheerios

HEALTHY HELPINGS

In addition to exercise and other lifestyle choices, what you eat has a major impact on cholesterol levels. Filling your diet with foods like these could help lower LDL cholesterol by up to 30%.

PLANT PROTEINS (think tofu, soy milk, lentils, chickpeas, beans, tempeh)

NUTS (including almonds, walnuts, pistachios and nut butters)

MONOUNSATURATED FATS (think olive oil and avocados)

VISCOUS SOLUBLE FIBER (like what's in barley, whole-grain breads, berries or Cheerios*, which contains whole-grain oats)

PLANT STEROLS (such as those found in peas and some enriched spreads)

*Three grams of soluble fiber daily from whole-grain oat foods, like Cheerios cereal, in a diet low in saturated fat and cholesterol, may reduce the risk of heart disease. Specially marked Cheerios varieties provide 0.75 grams per serving.

Getty Images (heart straw and pill).

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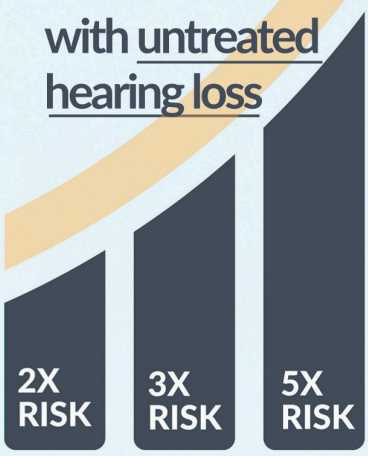
Audien Hearing



NEW STUDY SHOWS:

32%
[1] decreased risk of dementia with hearing aids

[2] Risk of dementia with untreated hearing loss



Hearing loss level

1. Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health: New Study Links Dementia With Hearing Loss In Older Adults 2. Johns Hopkins Medicine: The Hidden Risks of Hearing Loss

> **"The people who live longest generally do regular physical activity, eat plant-based diets and have good social connections.**

precise. Some 17 million American adults for whom a statin drug was previously recommended no longer needed one, including 4 million people currently on such meds, according to a study published last summer. But the same study found that 16 million people who were eligible for a statin based on the newer criteria were not taking one, which means more people overall could potentially benefit from taking a statin.

It's worth noting that statins are not the only meds prescribed for high cholesterol. For people with certain types of heart disease and LDL cholesterol that remains at 70 mg/dL or above, the AHA calls for adding a nonstatin drug such as a PCSK9 inhibitor.

TRUE OR FALSE?

Medicine is the best way to lower cholesterol.

IT DEPENDS

"In societies with high longevity, the people who live longest generally do regular physical activity, eat plant-based diets and have good social connections—and they have lower cholesterol levels to show for it," says Erica Spatz, M.D., a preventive cardiologist at Yale Medicine. This is why experts suggest that most people try to lower their cholesterol levels with healthy lifestyle changes before turning to medicine.

Effective strategies include doing moderate aerobic exercise for at least half an hour most days and stopping smoking. Changing your diet is also key. (See the sidebar on page 65 for suggestions.) Other steps recommended by the AHA include limiting alcohol, sleeping enough and getting your weight to a healthy level.

Expect it to take six to nine months for these changes to affect your cholesterol levels, Dr. Kopecky says. If your levels remain high after that, consider medication—but for the best effect, don't let up on the healthy lifestyle changes you've made.

KNOW YOUR NUMBERS

"Heart health starts with people knowing their cholesterol numbers and understanding that persistently high levels have been clearly shown to increase cardiovascular risk," says Dr. Spatz. Cholesterol is measured via a blood test that generally is done every three years—more often if your cholesterol runs high. Some women develop high cholesterol early, but for many the numbers creep up around menopause, says Dr. Spatz.

The ideal targets for healthy people:

TOTAL CHOLESTEROL
BELOW 200 MG/DL

LDL (often called "bad" cholesterol)
UNDER 100 MG/DL

HDL ("good" cholesterol—it removes excess cholesterol from the blood)
60 MG/DL OR HIGHER

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