

What is High [blood] Cholesterol?

High cholesterol or hypercholesterolemia is the presence of high levels of cholesterol in the blood. Cholesterol is a waxy substance that's found in the fats (lipids) in the blood. The body needs some cholesterol to continue building healthy cells. However, too much cholesterol can increase a person's risk of developing heart disease.

When a person has high cholesterol, they may develop fatty deposits in their blood vessels. Eventually, these deposits make it difficult for enough blood to flow through the arteries. The heart may not get as much oxygen-rich blood as it needs, which increases the risk of a heart attack. Decreased blood flow to the brain can cause a stroke.

High cholesterol can result from a variety of factors, including your genetic composition, what you eat (e.g., too much saturated fat), and how much you weigh. Genetic contributions are usually due to the additive effects of multiple genes, but occasionally may be due to a single gene defect, such as in the case of familial hypercholesterolemia..

Who is affected by high cholesterol in Connecticut?

- About 38% of adults have high cholesterol.
- Adults 65 years of age and older are more likely to report having high cholesterol than adults 45-54 years of age (53% vs. 38%).
- More males report having high cholesterol than females (39% vs. 30%).

Data Source: *Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, 2007-2009*

Why is it important to know if you have a family history of high cholesterol or early heart disease?

- A family history of high cholesterol may put you at a greater than average risk of developing high cholesterol.
- Your risk of high cholesterol may also be increased if a father or brother was affected by early heart disease (before age 50) or if a mother or sister was affected by early heart disease (before age 60).

Why is it important to learn about high cholesterol?

There are no symptoms of high cholesterol. Many people have never had their cholesterol checked, so they don't know whether they are at an increased risk. A simple blood test can tell you your cholesterol level. Your doctor may recommend more frequent cholesterol tests if your cholesterol level is high, or if you have a family history of heart disease or high cholesterol.

Your Family Health History

Know your past. Act in the present. Protect your future.

The good news:

There are steps you can take to prevent high cholesterol—or to reduce your levels if they are high. You can:

- Lose extra pounds and maintain a healthy weight.
- Quit smoking
- Eat a low-fat, low-salt diet that includes many fruits, vegetables and whole grains.
- Exercise on most days of the week for at least 30 minutes.
- Drink alcohol in moderation, if at all.
- Take medication, as prescribed by your doctor.

High Cholesterol Resources:

Connecticut Department of Public Health (DPH)

www.ct.gov/dph

National Cholesterol Education Program

www.nhlbi.nih.gov/about/ncep/ncep_pd.htm

Provides objectives for health professionals, patients and the public, and the community to reduce the prevalence of elevated blood cholesterol in the United States, and thereby contribute to reducing heart disease morbidity and mortality.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

www.cdc.gov/cholesterol/

Contains statistics, resources, and guidelines.

American Heart Association - Cholesterol

www.heart.org/HEARTORG/Conditions/Cholesterol/CholesterolATH_UCM_001089_SubHomePage.jsp

Learning About Familial Hypercholesterolemia

www.genome.gov/25520184