

Mind your cholesterol for a healthy heart

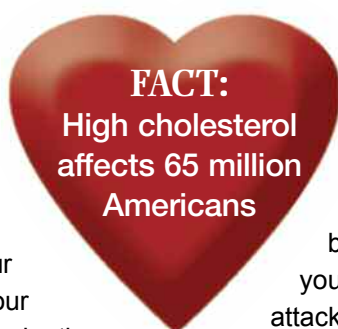
By Teddi Dineley Johnson

For patients recovering from heart bypass surgery, "I wish I hadn't eaten so many cheeseburgers" is a familiar refrain. Cheeseburgers alone might not cause heart disease, but the greasy fast food favorite certainly can raise cholesterol levels.

High blood cholesterol increases your risk for heart disease, which is the leading cause of death in the United States for both men and women. According to the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute, high blood cholesterol affects more than 65 million Americans, and the higher your cholesterol, the greater your risk for heart disease.

Your liver and other cells in your body make about 75 percent of your blood cholesterol. The rest is made by the foods you eat, including those cheeseburgers. But while cholesterol tends to get a bad rap, it's important to remember that your body actually needs some cholesterol.

"Cholesterol is important for building certain tissues in the body," says Gerald Fletcher, MD, a cardiologist at Mayo Clinic College of Medicine in Jacksonville, Fla., and a spokesman for the American Heart Association. "Certain parts of the body have to have it, but the excessive cholesterol in the blood is what causes problems with the heart and the brain."



Various parts of the organ systems of the body and most all tissues have some cholesterol as a building block, Fletcher says, but when cholesterol becomes high in your blood, problems will likely develop.

Your body makes all the cholesterol it needs, but extra cholesterol can build up in the inner walls of the arteries that feed your brain and heart. Over time, those cholesterol

deposits, called plaque, can cause your arteries to narrow and become less flexible. When this happens, less blood can pass through them. Your

blood carries oxygen to your heart and brain. Heart attacks and strokes happen when the blood supply to a portion of the heart or brain is cut off by a blockage.

The good, the bad and the ugly

If you've ever Googled "cholesterol," you no doubt learned that it is a soft, waxy, fat-like substance. As ugly as it sounds, cholesterol can be a confusing subject because there is "good" cholesterol and there is "bad" cholesterol. The good cholesterol, high-density lipoprotein — or HDL — may have a protective effect. If your HDL is high, it may reduce your risk of heart disease and stroke. And then there is the bad cholesterol, the low-density lipoprotein, or LDL. Most of your body's cholesterol is made up of LDL. It's bad because when there is too much in your blood, it can clog your arteries and raise your risk for heart attacks and strokes.

"LDL is the bad guy," Fletcher says. "It needs to be very low. It is a known fact, just as driving a car at 200 miles per hour is dangerous, it has been proven beyond a shadow of a doubt that LDL is related to heart attack and stroke."

High blood cholesterol can run in families, so you can pin some of the blame on Grandpa Henry and Grandma Sally if your body makes too much of it. Age and gender also play a role. Cholesterol levels tend to rise with age. In fact, a woman's LDL, or "bad"

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>> Weight and physical activity levels can affect your cholesterol levels, so stay fit.

cholesterol, increases after menopause.

But take heart: There are some things you can do to lower your levels. Diet, weight and physical activity can affect your cholesterol levels. Getting about 30 minutes of exercise on most days of the week can help you lose weight, which in turn can lower your bad cholesterol and raise your good cholesterol.

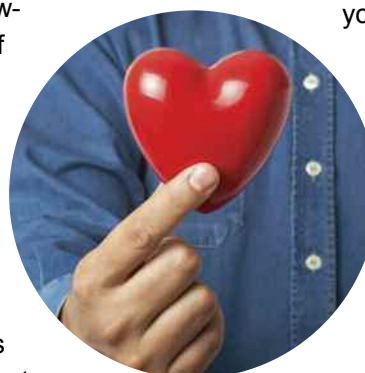
Aim for a diet that's low in saturated fat and cholesterol. Stock up on fat-free or 1 percent dairy products, lean meats, fish, skinless poultry, whole grain foods, and fruits and vegetables. Increase your intake of soluble fiber, such as oats, dried peas and beans. Omega-3 fatty acids, found in some fatty fish and in some plant sources, may also reduce your heart disease risk.

In some cases, prescription medications can help, so talk to your doctor about all of your options.

"There are many excellent drugs out there, but probably the best ones are the statin drugs," Fletcher says. "They will act within the

liver to block the body's uptake of cholesterol, and will help metabolize the cholesterol properly to decrease the amount of cholesterol in the blood, creating a more favorable situation for the heart and blood vessels."

But remember: Even if your doctor prescribes cholesterol-lowering medications, it's still important to maintain heart-healthy behaviors such as diet and exercise.



Know your numbers

Anyone can have high blood cholesterol and it's important to know your numbers. If you are 20 years old or older, you should have your cholesterol checked at least once every five years. A total cholesterol level of less than 200 is ideal. If your doctor says your levels are elevated, you'll need to get tested more often. Lowering your cholesterol lessens your risk for developing heart disease and reduces your

chance of dying from a heart attack or stroke.

Each year, more than 1 million Americans have heart attacks and about 500,000 Americans die from heart disease.



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