

Have a Healthy Heart

by Francisco Contreras, M.D.

Q. With heart disease as rampant as it is, just how concerned should I be if I have a high cholesterol level?

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A. When people get together and the subject of health comes up, it's very common to hear someone ask, "What's your cholesterol level?" If the answer is 195, people think it's good. However, if the answer is, say, 220, then the reaction is typically sympathetic.

Most people think anything under 200 is good and anything over that is bad.

But a level of 195 may not be good, and 220 may not be all that bad.

There is good cholesterol and there is bad cholesterol. High-Density

Lipoproteins (HDL) is the "good" cholesterol and Low-Density Lipoproteins (LDL)

is the "bad" cholesterol. The important thing is the ratio between them.

HDL actually helps prevent cardiovascular disease because it helps remove LDL

from blood cells, which means that less LDL can enter into the blood vessel

walls. HDL can reverse the buildup in the arteries and act as a blood-thinning

agent. This is very important to good heart health.

LDL, on the other hand, is very unhealthy for you if the level

in your blood
is high. It can cause the inside layers of your arteries to
inflamm, and fatty
plaques and platelets can begin to build up. The blood can
start to thicken, a
process that can lead to heart complications.

Here is the most important fact to know about cholesterol
levels: It is not
the individual levels of HDL and LDL or their combined levels
that make a big
difference. It is the ratio of HDL to LDL that will determine
your risk for
heart disease.

Your total cholesterol divided by your HDL should be less than
4, and your
LDL divided by the HDL should be less than 3.

If your ratios work out to be less than 4 and less than 3
respectively, you
are at a low risk to develop heart disease. If your ratios are
higher, your risk
of heart disease is much higher, regardless of what the
individual levels of
cholesterol are. That is why a person with a total cholesterol
greater than 200
may not be at risk, and a person with a lower cholesterol
level may be at great
risk.

I recommend that you have your cholesterol levels checked by a
doctor and
then work out your ratios. If you see that they are higher
than what they should
be, you should ask your doctor and a nutritionist to help you
lower them,
preferably through diet and exercise instead of prescription

drugs. May you be
blessed with a healthy heart.

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