



Common Misconceptions about Cholesterol



There is a plethora of information about cholesterol. However, not all information is valid and up-to-date. Thus, you need to be careful with the information that you may hear or read. Here are some misconceptions about cholesterol:

- **Using margarine instead of butter will help lower my cholesterol.** Both margarine and butter are high in fat, so use both in moderation. From a dietary perspective, the major factor affecting blood cholesterol is how much saturated fat is in the food. Reducing your intake of saturated fat is the key to helping control cholesterol. Most soft or liquid margarines have less saturated fat and are preferable to the stick forms for a heart-healthy diet. It's best to select trans fat-free margarines. However, eat all fatty foods in moderation. (Check the [margarine vs. butter](#) article.)
- **Thin people don't have to worry about high cholesterol.** Overweight people are more likely to have high cholesterol from eating too many fatty foods, but thin people should also have their cholesterol checked regularly. Often people who don't gain weight easily are less aware of how much saturated fat they eat. Nobody can "eat anything they want" and stay heart healthy. Have your cholesterol checked regularly regardless of your weight, exercise habits and diet.
- **My doctor hasn't said anything about my cholesterol, so I don't have to worry.** Unfortunately, not all physicians are as proactive about healthy lifestyles as they should be. Your health is your responsibility. Make sure that you have a blood cholesterol test and learn how to interpret all the numbers, including HDL (good) cholesterol, LDL (bad) cholesterol and triglyceride levels. If you're in a high or borderline-high range, discuss options with your physician. You may be able to control the levels by eating a diet lower in saturated fat and cholesterol, getting 30–60 minutes of physical activity on most days and quitting smoking. If lifestyle changes alone don't work, your physician may prescribe a cholesterol-lowering medication.
- **Since the nutrition label on my favourite food says there's no cholesterol, I can be sure that it's a "heart-healthy" choice.** Nutrition labels on food are very helpful when choosing heart-healthy foods, but you need to know what to look for. Many "low-cholesterol" foods contain high levels of saturated fat or trans fatty acids — both of which contribute to high blood cholesterol. Even foods that claim to be "low-fat" may have a higher fat content than expected. Look for the amount of saturated fat, total fat, cholesterol and total calories in a *serving* of the product. Also check how much a serving is. Often it's smaller than you think. The first ingredient listed is the one used most in the product, so choose products where fats and oils appear later in the ingredient listing. The Food and Drug Administration will require foods to be labelled for trans fats by 2006. Many manufacturers have already

begun doing this. Trans fats are found in variable amounts in most foods with partially hydrogenated oils such as baked goods, fried foods and some margarines and dairy products.

- **I recently read that eggs aren't so bad for your cholesterol after all, so I guess I can go back to having my two eggs for breakfast every morning.** One egg contains about 213 milligrams of dietary cholesterol. That's a lot given that the daily recommended cholesterol limit is 300 milligrams. An egg a day can fit within heart-healthy guidelines only if cholesterol from other sources, such as meats, poultry and dairy products, is limited. For example, eating one egg for breakfast, drinking two cups of coffee with one tablespoon of half-and-half each, lunching on four ounces of lean turkey breast without skin and one tablespoon of mayonnaise, and having a 6-ounce serving of broiled, short loin porterhouse steak for dinner would account for about 510 mg of dietary cholesterol that day — nearly twice the recommended limit. If you're going to eat an egg every morning, substitute vegetables for some of the meat, or drink your coffee without half-and-half.
- **I'm a woman so I don't have to worry. High cholesterol is a man's problem.** Pre-menopausal women are usually protected from high LDL (bad) levels of cholesterol, because the female hormone oestrogen tends to raise HDL (good) cholesterol levels. Postmenopausal women may find that even a heart-healthy diet and regular exercise aren't enough to keep their cholesterol from rising. If you're approaching menopause, it's especially important to have your cholesterol checked and talk with your doctor about your options. Postmenopausal hormone therapy (PHT, formerly called hormone replacement therapy or HRT) is **not** recommended to prevent heart disease and may not be the best answer for every woman.
- **You don't need to have your cholesterol checked until you reach middle age.** It's a good idea to start having your cholesterol checked at an early age. Even children, especially those in families with a history of heart disease, can have high cholesterol levels. And evidence exists that these children are at greater risk for developing heart disease as adults. Lack of exercise, poor dietary habits and genetics can all affect a child's cholesterol levels. You're never too young to develop a heart-healthy lifestyle by eating foods low in saturated fats, getting 30–60 minutes of physical activity on most or all days, and avoiding tobacco products.