

Raised Cholesterol

Raised cholesterol is one of the most common things we discuss in general practice (GPs' bread and butter, or perhaps low-fat spread!). Hardly a day goes by without us advising someone about their cholesterol levels. Unfortunately, it can also be one of the most confusing areas of health, with conflicting advice from the media, social media, and even different healthcare professionals.

If you're reading this page, you've probably had a blood test showing a raised total cholesterol level (above 5 mmol/L), or you've been told that your LDL ("bad") cholesterol is higher than ideal compared with your HDL ("good") cholesterol.

This guide explains what your results mean, what might be causing them, what you can do to improve them, and when treatment may be recommended.

Understanding Your Cholesterol Results

Cholesterol is not inherently bad. In fact, it is an essential substance that your body needs to build cells, produce hormones, and support many normal bodily functions.

The concern arises when LDL cholesterol levels become too high. LDL cholesterol can contribute to the build-up of fatty deposits within the arteries, increasing the risk of cardiovascular disease, including heart attack and stroke. HDL cholesterol has the opposite effect, helping to remove excess cholesterol from the bloodstream and transport it back to the liver for processing.

A raised cholesterol level, particularly when LDL is high and HDL is relatively low, is a very common finding.

Common contributing factors include:

- A diet high in saturated fats and ultra-processed foods, such as fried foods, pastries, processed meats, butter, cream, and high-fat cheeses.
- Excess alcohol consumption, which can increase both cholesterol and triglyceride levels.
- Low levels of physical activity.
- Being overweight or obese.
- Smoking, which lowers protective HDL cholesterol and damages blood vessels.

For some people, cholesterol levels are strongly influenced by genetics. This is often suggested by a family history of high cholesterol or heart disease at a younger age. In these situations, lifestyle changes remain important for overall health but may have a more limited effect on cholesterol levels, meaning medication is sometimes needed.

Improving Cholesterol Through Lifestyle Medicine

Many of the most effective ways to improve cholesterol are based on the principles of lifestyle medicine. While medication can be very helpful when needed, lifestyle measures remain the foundation of long-term cardiovascular health. Here are six tips based on the Six Pillars of

Lifestyle Medicine:

Physical Activity

Physical activity is one of the most effective ways to improve cholesterol and reduce cardiovascular risk.

Unlike cholesterol-lowering medication, exercise can both lower LDL cholesterol and increase HDL cholesterol. It also benefits blood pressure, blood sugar control, and overall heart health.

Aim for at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity activity each week. This could include:

- Brisk walking
- Cycling
- Swimming
- Dancing
- Gardening

It is also worth including some strength or resistance training twice a week. Building and maintaining muscle helps your body process fats and sugars more effectively, supporting healthier cholesterol levels.

Nutrition

Diet plays an important role in cholesterol management.

A whole-food, plant-rich eating pattern can help lower LDL cholesterol and improve overall cardiovascular health. Aim to eat more:

- Vegetables
- Fruit
- Wholegrains
- Beans and lentils
- Nuts and seeds

Swapping saturated fats for healthier unsaturated fats may also help. Examples include olive oil, avocados, nuts, and oily fish.

Try to reduce foods high in saturated fat and highly processed foods, including:

- Fried foods
- Crisps and savoury snacks
- Processed meats
- Butter, cream, and high-fat cheeses
- Cakes, pastries, and confectionery

Increasing soluble fibre can be particularly beneficial. Good sources include oats, beans, lentils, apples, and flaxseeds.

Healthy Weight

If you are carrying excess weight, losing weight can help improve cholesterol levels and reduce overall cardiovascular risk.

The good news is that you do not need to lose large amounts of weight to see benefits. Even modest, sustainable weight loss can improve cholesterol, blood pressure, and blood sugar levels.

Sleep

Sleep is often overlooked when discussing heart health.

Aim for 7 to 9 hours of good-quality sleep per night where possible. Poor sleep can affect appetite, weight management, blood pressure, and overall cardiovascular health.

Stress Management

Stress does not directly cause high cholesterol, but chronic stress can influence many behaviours that affect heart health, including eating habits, alcohol consumption, physical activity, and sleep quality.

Strategies such as mindfulness, relaxation techniques, spending time outdoors, hobbies, social activities, and regular exercise can all help support emotional wellbeing.

Avoiding Harmful Substances

If you smoke, stopping smoking is one of the most important steps you can take for your cardiovascular health. Smoking damages blood vessels, accelerates artery disease, and lowers protective HDL cholesterol.

Limiting alcohol intake may also help improve cholesterol and triglyceride levels, while reducing overall cardiovascular risk.

Social Connection

Good health is about more than diet and exercise.

Maintaining supportive relationships with family, friends, and your wider community can have a positive impact on both physical and mental wellbeing. People with strong social connections often find it easier to maintain healthy lifestyle habits over the long term.

Follow-Up and Treatment Options

In most cases, we would recommend repeating your cholesterol blood tests after around 3 to 6 months to assess whether lifestyle changes have improved your cholesterol levels.

If cholesterol remains significantly raised, if an inherited cause is suspected, or if your overall cardiovascular risk is high, medication may be recommended.

The most commonly prescribed medicines are statins. These are highly effective at lowering LDL cholesterol and have been shown to significantly reduce the risk of heart attack and stroke.

Importantly, the decision to start medication is not based on cholesterol levels alone. We also consider your overall cardiovascular risk, including factors such as:

- Age
- Blood pressure
- Smoking status
- Diabetes
- Family history
- Rheumatoid arthritis and certain other medical conditions

We often assess this using a cardiovascular risk calculator called QRISK.

When to Contact Us

If you have any questions about your cholesterol results, would like support with lifestyle changes, or would like to discuss whether medication might be appropriate for you, please contact the practice.

For most people, raised cholesterol is something that can be improved. Small, sustainable changes made consistently over time can have a significant impact on both cholesterol levels and long-term heart health.