Your blood lipid levels have a lot to do with your chances of having a heart attack or stroke.

What does a blood lipid test measure?
“Lipids” are fats in the blood. A blood lipid test measures:
- **Triglycerides**
  - Triglycerides are a form of fat made in the body.
  - High levels can be due to overweight/obesity, being inactive, smoking, drinking too much alcohol, or eating a diet very high in starches and sugars.
- **LDL, HDL, and total cholesterol**
  - Cholesterol is a fat-like substance made in the body. It is also found in animal-based foods.
  - **LDL ("bad") cholesterol** can slowly build up along the inner walls of the arteries that feed the heart and brain. This can block the flow of blood, causing a heart attack or stroke.
  - **HDL ("good") cholesterol** helps carry away LDL cholesterol. This helps keep your blood flowing freely.
  - **Total cholesterol** includes LDL and HDL cholesterol as well as other minor forms.

General targets (Talk with your doctor for your own lipid goals.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lipid Test</th>
<th>Target</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Triglycerides</td>
<td>Less than 150 mg/dl* (lower numbers are better)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LDL (bad) cholesterol</td>
<td>Less than 100 mg/dl (lower numbers are better)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HDL (good) cholesterol</td>
<td>More than 40 (for men) or 50 (for women) mg/dl (higher numbers are better)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total cholesterol</td>
<td>Less than 200 mg/dl* (lower numbers are better)</td>
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* Milligrams per deciliter

Levels outside these targets may increase your risk for a heart attack, stroke, or other health problems.
How to improve your lipid levels
The lifestyle changes below have been shown to improve lipid levels. Check the ones you are willing to try.

- **Lose weight if you are overweight or obese.**
  - Balance the calories in what you eat with the calories you burn by being active.

- **Be active.**
  - Aim for 150 minutes per week or more of a moderate activity like brisk walking.
  - Or aim for 75 minutes per week or more of a more intense activity like jogging.
  - Do strength training exercises twice per week.

- **Limit saturated fat.** Saturated fat is found mainly in animal-based foods, such as fatty meats, whole or 2% milk, butter, and ice cream. It is also found in palm and coconut oils.
  - Eat cooked dried beans, lentils, split peas, fish, or skinless poultry more often than beef or pork.
  - Enjoy fish twice a week, especially fatty fish such as salmon, herring, and tuna.
  - Try soy foods, such as soymilk, soy burgers, and tofu.
  - Limit meat portions to 5-6 ounces per day. Choose lean cuts of meat, and trim visible fat from meat before cooking.
  - Choose nonfat or low-fat dairy foods, such as nonfat or 1% milk or yogurt and low-fat cheese.
  - Avoid palm and coconut oils.

- **Eat as little trans fat as possible.** Trans fats are vegetable oils that have been chemically altered in processing to make them solid. The process is called hydrogenation. Trans fats are found in many packaged, fast, fried, and frozen foods, baked goods, and margarine spreads.
  - Check ingredient labels, and avoid foods that contain hydrogenated fats.
  - Also check Nutrition Facts labels, and choose products with no trans fat.

- **Choose unsaturated fats.**
  - Use vegetable oils and liquid or tub margarine instead of butter or stick margarine.
  - Enjoy a small handful of nuts a day.
  - Margarine and salad dressing enriched with plant sterols can lower lipids even further.
Limit dietary cholesterol.
- Cholesterol is found in animal-based foods, especially egg yolks, fatty meats, fatty dairy products, and organ meats.
- Limit egg yolks to 3-4 per week. Try using one whole egg and one egg white for two eggs.

Increase fiber.
- Fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and cooked dried beans, split peas, and lentils are rich in fiber.
- Enjoy oatmeal and oat bran.
- Add fiber to your diet slowly. Also drink plenty of water.

Avoid added sugars.
- Enjoy fresh fruit for snacks and dessert.
- Drink water instead of sugary drinks.

Limit alcohol. Drink no more than one drink per day for women and two drinks for men.

Stop smoking.

What if lifestyle changes don’t improve your lipid levels enough? Your doctor may also prescribe medicine.

Take Action

Choose one of the changes that you checked above. Break it into small steps. Make a plan below to put it into action next week.

Be specific. For example: “On Saturday I will buy oatmeal and tub margarine with no trans fat. I will eat the oatmeal for breakfast on three days next week and use the margarine instead of butter on toast and in cooking.”

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