



# Cholesterol Levels

Your cholesterol levels show how much cholesterol is circulating in your blood. Your HDL (“good” cholesterol) is the one number you want to be high (ideally above 60). Your LDL (“bad” cholesterol) should be below 100. Your total should be below 200. Talk with your provider about what your results mean for you and how to manage your cholesterol.

## Why are my cholesterol numbers important?

Your [cholesterol](#) levels are important because they help you know your risk for [heart disease](#). Cholesterol is a type of lipid (fat) that helps your body perform many important functions. But too much cholesterol in your [blood](#) is harmful. It can enter your [artery](#) wall, damage its integrity and lead to atherosclerotic plaque (hardened deposits) forming.

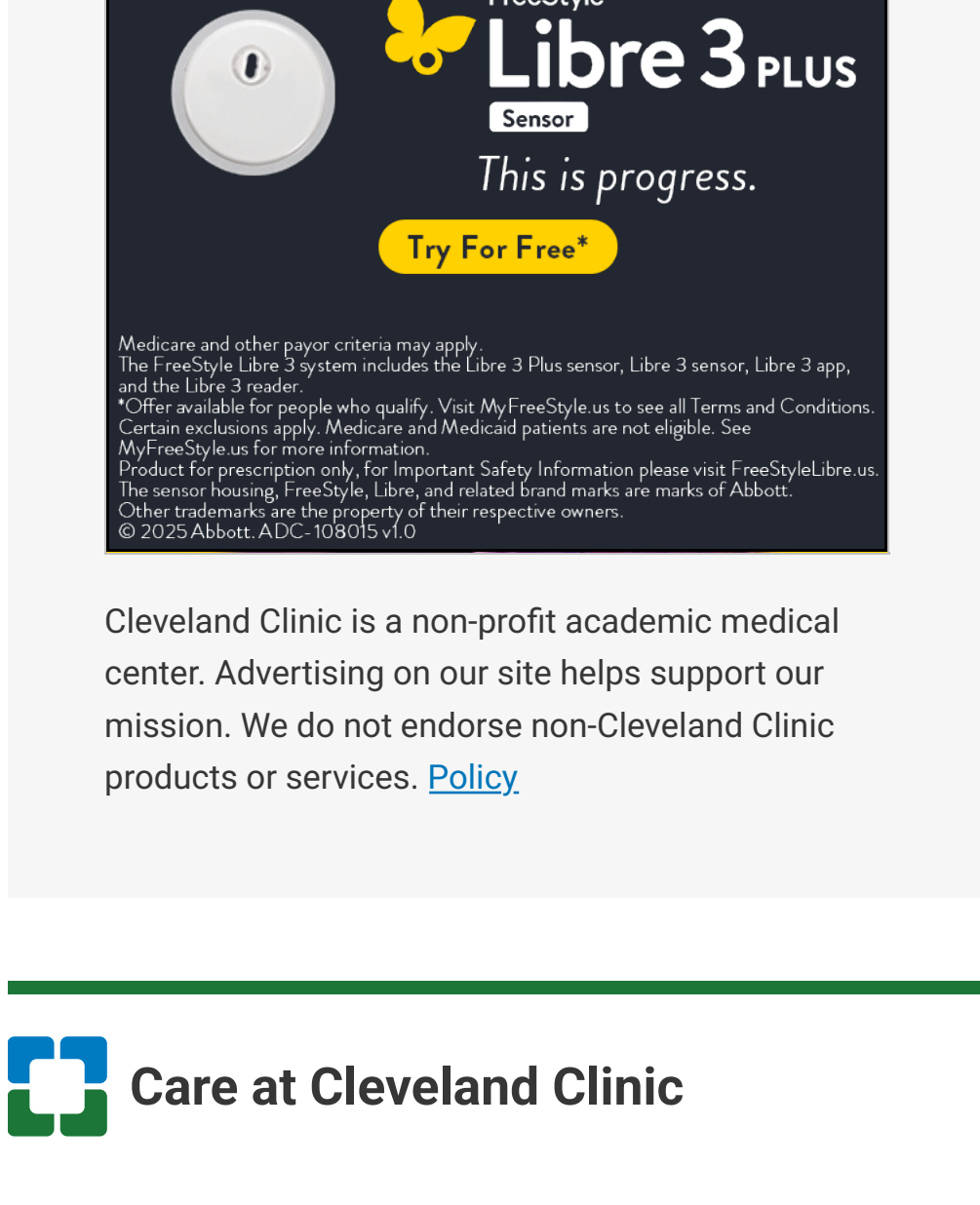
This process of plaque buildup is called [atherosclerosis](#). It can lead to serious problems like:

- [Coronary artery disease](#): Blocked blood flow to your [heart](#).
- [Peripheral artery disease](#): Blocked blood flow to your legs and arms.
- [Carotid artery disease](#): Blocked blood flow to your [brain](#).

Cholesterol travels through your blood silently. And it turns into [plaque](#) silently. Plaque buildup is like someone tiptoeing on a carpet. You might not see or notice its presence for a long time. You may have no symptoms until you have a [heart attack](#) or [stroke](#). At that point, the plaque is like high heels on a hardwood floor. And it's already caused serious damage to your body.

You can live for many years with high cholesterol and not even know it. That's why it's essential to get your cholesterol numbers checked on a regular basis. If your cholesterol numbers are too high ([hyperlipidemia](#)), that's a red flag for you and your healthcare provider.

Many people have high cholesterol, which is a major risk factor for heart disease. But you're not stuck with the cholesterol numbers you have. It's possible to change them. Catching high cholesterol early gives you a chance to make changes and achieve good cholesterol numbers.



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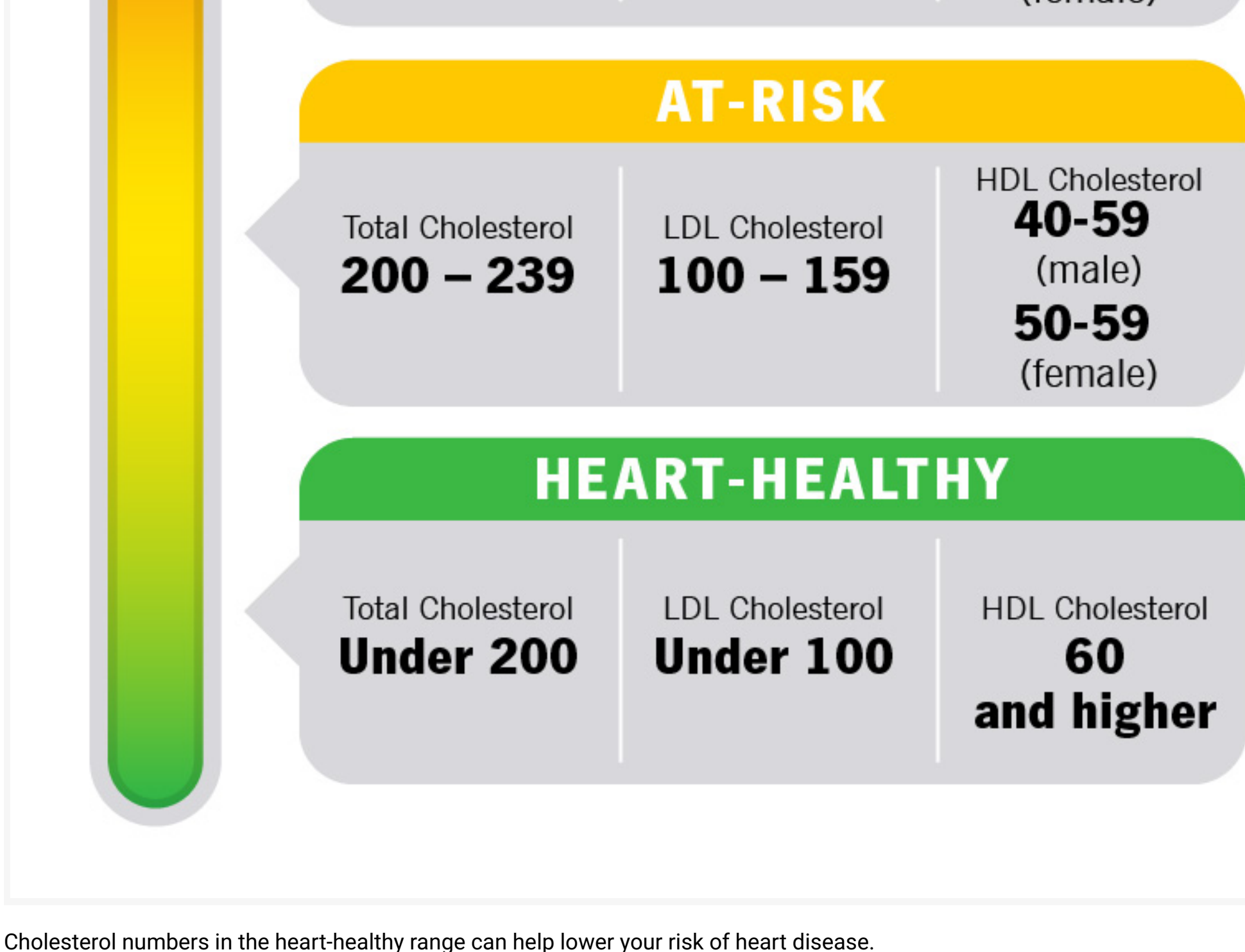
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# Cholesterol Levels



Cholesterol numbers in the heart-healthy range can help lower your risk of heart disease.

## What cholesterol levels are tested?

The main cholesterol levels your provider checks are:

- Total cholesterol.** This is the total amount of cholesterol that's circulating in your blood.
- LDL or low-density lipoprotein.** This is the “bad” cholesterol that contributes to plaque buildup in your arteries, leading to heart attacks and strokes.
- HDL or high-density lipoprotein.** This is the “good” cholesterol that helps clear out the cholesterol your body doesn't need.
- Triglycerides.** This is a type of fat that can raise your heart attack and stroke risks.

Your provider checks your cholesterol levels with a blood test they call a [lipid panel](#) (or lipid profile). A provider will draw blood from a vein in your arm and send the blood to a lab for analysis. Be sure to closely follow your provider's instructions on how to prepare for the test. You'll likely need to fast for 12 hours beforehand. This means avoiding all foods and drinks except water.

When your results come in, your provider will let you know. You may also be able to access your results through your electronic medical record.

## What is the unit of measurement for cholesterol?

Healthcare providers measure cholesterol levels as milligrams of cholesterol per deciliter of blood. The abbreviation is mg/dL. Providers use these same units to measure your triglycerides.

## What are normal cholesterol levels?

Normal cholesterol levels vary based on your age, ethnicity and [sex](#).

### Normal cholesterol levels by age chart

The chart below shows normal cholesterol levels. Healthcare providers consider these good cholesterol numbers for most people. If you have heart disease or many risk factors, your LDL target may be different. Your healthcare provider may want your LDL level to be below 70 mg/dL. So, it's important to talk with your provider about your test results and what they mean for you.

All units in the chart below are mg/dL.

Age	Total cholesterol	Triglycerides	LDL cholesterol	HDL cholesterol
19 and younger	Below 170	Below 150	Below 110	Above 45
20 and older, males	125 to 200	Below 150	Below 100	40 or higher
20 and older, females	125 to 200	Below 150	Below 100	50 or higher

As you review your results, remember that you want your LDL to be low and your HDL to be high. Ideally, your HDL should be above 60 to offer you protection against heart disease.

### Sex-based differences

Most normal cholesterol levels are the same regardless of your sex. But there's one key difference among adults. That's your HDL number. As the chart above shows, [females](#) need a higher HDL level (at least 50) compared to males (at least 40).

## What's considered high cholesterol?

High cholesterol generally means your total cholesterol is 200 mg/dL or higher. But providers use additional categories like “borderline high” and “near optimal” to break down your results. If your numbers are close to normal levels, they may be easier to manage through lifestyle and dietary changes.

### High cholesterol levels by age chart

The chart below shows cholesterol levels that are higher than normal. All units are mg/dL.

Age	Total cholesterol	Non-HDL cholesterol	LDL cholesterol
19 and younger	Borderline high: 170-199; High: 200 or higher	Borderline high: 120-144; High: 145 or higher	Borderline high: 110-129; High: 130 or higher
20 and older	Borderline high: 200-239; High: 240 or higher	High: 130 or higher	Near-optimal: 100-129; Borderline high: 130-159; High: 160-189; Very high: 190 or higher

## Can cholesterol levels be too low or too high?

There are upper limits for your total cholesterol. Lower is better — as low as you can go. Researchers have found that a lower LDL is better. They haven't set a lower limit for it. The higher your HDL number is, the better it is for you. So your LDL can't be too low and your HDL can't be too high.

## How often should I get my cholesterol checked?

Your provider will tell you how often you need your cholesterol checked. It depends on your:

- Age:** The older you get, the more often you need to have your numbers checked.
- Family history:** If you have a close biological family member with a history of heart disease, you face a higher risk of heart problems, too. You may need cholesterol tests more often if your family member has high cholesterol or a history of heart attack or stroke.
- Risk factors for heart disease:** If you have a heart disease diagnosis or risk factors, you'll need cholesterol tests more often.
- Sex:** Males need more frequent tests starting at a younger age.

Children should get their first test between ages 9 and 11. Then, they should receive a test every five years. Your child's provider may recommend starting at a younger age based on family history.

Here are general guidelines for adults based on sex and age.

### Males

Age	How often to get your cholesterol checked
20 to 44	Every five years.
45 to 65	Every one to two years.
65+	Every year.

### Females

Age	How often to get your cholesterol checked
20 to 54	Every five years.
55 to 65	Every one to two years.
65+	Every year.

## A note from Cleveland Clinic

Knowing your cholesterol numbers can help you learn your risk for heart disease. But keep in mind that your cholesterol numbers are just part of the story. Your provider will also look at other aspects of your health to learn more about your risks. So, if your numbers fall outside the normal range, don't panic. Talk with your provider about what your cholesterol levels mean in the context of your overall health. And work with your provider to get your numbers back to a healthier place.

### Statins & Muscle Pain

Why statins can cause muscle pain — and what might help ease the discomfort.

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Medically Reviewed

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### References

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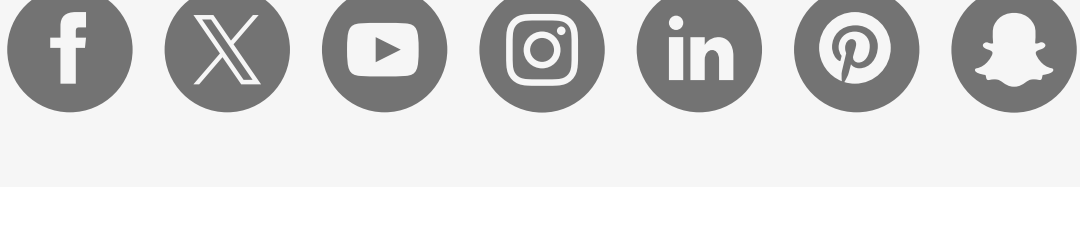


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