



The Friday Blog by Dr Francey
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How high is too high? and why does it even matter?

One of the most common tests people ask us to do for them, is to check their cholesterol. We include it in our 'health checks' and it also forms part of routine tests in certain chronic conditions like diabetes or blood pressure annual reviews. But what actually IS IT? And why are we so concerned about it?

In a nutshell, it's a fatty substance in your blood stream. You can't feel it, so you wouldn't be able to tell yourself if it is high as it causes no 'symptoms'. It can build up if you eat too much fatty food, and if you do too little exercise, carry too much weight, or have other bad habits such as smoking or drinking too much.

For some people, it can run in their family. This is called 'familial hypercholesterolaemia'.

So, if it doesn't cause symptoms, why does it even matter?? Well, cholesterol is made in the liver and does serve some purposes, for example synthesis of some hormones, production of bile, (which aids digestion) and production of vitamin D to name a few.

However, if the cholesterol builds up, it causes a sticky deposit in your blood vessels, 'furring' them up, which in turn causes a reduction in blood flow, and bits of the cholesterol 'plaque' can also break off, leading to heart attacks and stroke.

All bad news.

What is a normal cholesterol reading?

We do a blood test to measure your 'total' cholesterol and can also break it down into 'good' (HDL) and 'bad' (LDL) cholesterol as well as 'triglycerides'.

As a guide, normal levels are:

Result	Healthy level
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Total cholesterol	5 or below
HDL (good cholesterol)	1 or above
LDL (bad cholesterol)	3 or below
Non-HDL (bad cholesterol)	4 or below
Triglycerides	2.3 or below

So what can you do about it?

Well, if you've had a test showing high cholesterol, we would normally try and work out how much of a risk that poses to you, based on other risk factors, such as your age, sex, ethnicity, your blood pressure, and weight, (bmi), taking into account your family history and smoking status etc.

We will generally encourage you to increase exercise, optimise your weight, stop smoking, reduce alcohol, and give you some advice on how to make positive adjustments to your diet to help lower your levels.

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If your high cholesterol is likely to put you at risk of stroke or heart attack, we may also suggest you start some medication. Commonly these medicines are known as 'statins' and there are a few different ones.

(There are a few less common treatments if these are unsuitable).

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From a diet perspective, there are a few changes you can make. Some fats are worse, these are called 'saturated' fats, whereas 'unsaturated fats' are better for you.

Again as a guide:

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Try to eat more:

- oily fish, like mackerel and salmon
- brown rice, bread and pasta
- nuts and seeds
- fruits and vegetables

Try to eat less:

- meat pies, sausages and fatty meat
- butter, lard and ghee
- cream and hard cheese, like cheddar
- cakes and biscuits
- food that contains coconut oil or palm oil

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As I have already mentioned, reducing alcohol, smoking and increasing exercise all help too; So there you go, a bit of a whizz through cholesterol, and how to improve it.

And just in time for those new year's resolutions we talked about last week!

After all, it's not JUST A NUMBER!