



## Rising interest in HDL - the “good cholesterol”

### Why is HDL (high-density lipoprotein) known as “good cholesterol”?

HDL is protein-fat carrier that acts as a scavenger in your blood, picking up cholesterol and transporting it to the liver for metabolism or excretion. Therefore, HDL helps to prevent the accumulation of lipids and formation of plaque in the artery walls. Plaque is associated with the narrowing and “hardening” of blood vessels that lead to atherosclerosis and heart disease.

### What is the recommended level of HDL?

Your total cholesterol level includes HDL, LDL, and other types of lipids. Low-density lipoprotein (LDL) is known as “bad cholesterol” because it circulates in the blood vessels, increasing the risk of plaque formation. For optimal health, you want to maintain low levels of LDL and high levels of HDL. For HDL, levels of at least 60 milligrams (mg) per deciliter (dL) of blood are considered healthy, cardio-protective levels. Levels of HDL below 40 mg/dL increase the risk of heart disease.

### Can I raise my HDL level?

In recent years, HDL has gained the attention of the medical field due to research showing the association of higher HDL levels with healthy blood vessels and improved cardiovascular and cognitive function. While HDL is controlled to some degree by genetics, the following lifestyle changes can maximize your HDL levels.

- Achieve and maintain a healthy weight.
  - If you are overweight, you can raise your HDL levels by losing 10% of your weight. So if you weigh 200 pounds, a 20-pound weight loss will improve your blood lipid levels.
- Choose healthy fats in your diet.
  - Decrease your intake of saturated fats that are found in meats and full-fat dairy products, such as cream, cheese, and whole milk.
  - Increase your intake of monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats that are found in vegetable oils (especially olive, canola, and peanut oils), avocados, nuts, flaxseed, and fatty fish.
- Engage in at least 30 minutes of physical activity on most days.
  - Aerobic exercise that increases your heart rate (such as brisk walking, swimming, and biking) can increase your HDL levels and help to control your weight.
- Avoid tobacco.
  - Smoking is associated with lower HDL levels. When you quit smoking, HDL levels rise significantly in a relatively short time.

Medications, such as statins, fibrates, and niacin can be prescribed to lower LDL and increase HDL levels. But healthy lifestyle habits are still essential. Nutrient-dense diets and regular physical activity can promote physical and mental health and prevent or delay the progression of chronic diseases, such as heart disease, hypertension, and diabetes in many ways!