

Ask the expert: Myths about high cholesterol



Liz Helden is a nurse lipid specialist at the Pediatric Lipid Clinic at Chedoke-McMaster Hospital at the Hamilton Health Sciences Centre in Hamilton, Ontario.

Dear Liz,

Q. I was recently diagnosed with high cholesterol but my body mass index is normal and I am not overweight. What could be causing high cholesterol?

*Signed,
Recently Diagnosed*

A. It is a common misconception that high cholesterol occurs only in people who are overweight. The reality is that even thin or fit people can have high cholesterol. Many factors may contribute to elevated cholesterol levels, including a family history of heart disease, age, diabetes, smoking, and abdominal obesity – meaning specifically men with a waist circumference of more than 102 centimeters (40”) and women with a waist circumference of more than 88 centimeters (35”).

The good news is that there are lifestyle modifications, such as diet and exercise that may help manage your cholesterol levels.

Health Canada recommends Canadians exercise for 30 to 60 minutes at least four days per week. Exercise can also raise HDL-cholesterol (the ‘good’ cholesterol), lower LDL-cholesterol (the ‘bad’

cholesterol) and reduce blood pressure – all of which are important to reduce the risk of heart disease.

However, exercise and diet alone are not always enough to lower cholesterol. If you are not overweight, maintaining a healthy body weight is important to keeping your cholesterol under control. In some situations, lifestyle modifications are not enough to control cholesterol levels. Approximately 80 per cent of the cholesterol in our blood is manufactured in the liver, and only 20 per cent comes from our diet. Some individuals, who already engage in a healthy lifestyle and who are not overweight, may need to take medications to help their liver to produce less cholesterol. Obviously, each Canadian will successfully manage their high cholesterol differently. Some people will need medication, in addition to a healthy lifestyle, to help manage cholesterol levels.

If you would like more information about the facts and myths about cholesterol, visit www.makingtheconnection.ca or call toll-free 1-877-4LOW-LDL (1-877-456-9535).

Obesity and Diabetes: Making the Connection between obesity and diabetes

People who are obese are more likely to be affected by type 2 diabetes—a condition in which the body either does not produce enough or cannot effectively use insulin. Insulin works to convert the food we eat into energy (sugar) to fuel the body. Diabetes is a major risk factor for heart disease. In fact, 80 per cent of people with diabetes will die from some kind of heart disease.

Type 2 diabetes may be prevented or delayed by modifying two of the known risk factors – obesity and physical activity. Eating a low-fat diet, regular daily exercise, and losing weight (if overweight) may delay the onset of diabetes as well as improve overall heart health.