

Health and Fitness

What is "blood cholesterol"? For that matter, what is cholesterol?

Pure cholesterol is an odorless, white, waxy, powdery substance. You cannot taste it or see it in the foods you eat.

Cholesterol is found in all foods of animal origin and is part of every animal cell. Your body uses cholesterol to make essential body substances such as cell walls and hormones, as well as for various other functions. Even if you didn't eat any cholesterol, your liver would manufacture enough for your body's needs.

Cholesterol is like other fat-like substances in that it will not mix with water. Therefore, to carry cholesterol and fat ('lipid) in the blood, the body wraps them in protein packages. This combination is called a "lipoprotein." Blood cholesterol is found in all the major lipoproteins, including the low density lipoproteins (LDLs) and the high density lipoproteins (HDLs).

How is blood cholesterol measured and how are the results expressed?

To measure your blood cholesterol level a small blood sample is taken and the amount of cholesterol is determined in a laboratory. The cholesterol level is expressed as milligrams per deciliter or "mg/dl." The average blood cholesterol level for middle-aged men and women in the U.S. is about 215 mg/dl. This means that the cholesterol found in a deciliter of liquid (which is one-tenth of a liter or approximately one-tenth of a quart) weighs 215 milligrams. For comparison, 28,350 milligrams equals 1 ounce.

From the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute

Part I of II

Next Issue: "Why Should I Care About Cholesterol?"

- Issued by the Wellness Center

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