Understanding the good and the bad about cholesterol: a NetWellness column

By Plain Dealer guest columnist
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Two different kinds of cholesterol are generally referred to as the "good" and the "bad." However, this isn't like a "50s Western. Even the cholesterol wearing the black hat isn't all bad.

What is cholesterol?

To understand how cholesterol works in the body, it is important to know a few things about cholesterol in general. Cholesterol is a fatty, waxy substance. The liver produces about 75 percent of the cholesterol in the body. This is a good thing, because cholesterol is an important component of cell membranes. It is also essential for the synthesis of some hormones and the production of vitamin D.

HDLs and LDLs – What they do in the body

Once cholesterol is produced, it needs to move to other parts of the body. In order to get to where it is needed, cholesterol in the liver attaches to proteins. Once the cholesterol and the proteins combine, they are called lipoproteins. There are several kinds of lipoproteins -- most notably, low-density lipoproteins (LDLs, the "bad" ones) and high-density lipoproteins (HDLs, the "good" ones).

The LDLs are the lipoproteins that carry...
cholesterol from the liver to the rest of the body. This is a good thing, and therefore LDLS are not all bad. However, too many LDLS in the bloodstream may indicate trouble. The waxy substance can build up in the arteries, particularly in the arteries around the heart. These deposits are called plaques. The plaques can eventually narrow an artery enough to block blood from flowing. This is definitely a BAD thing.

HDLs, on the other hand, have a very different job. They carry cholesterol from the bloodstream back to the liver. They ensure that the waxy substance does not accumulate in the arteries.

What are good cholesterol levels?

Generally, you want an LDL level under 100 milligrams per deciliter of blood (mg/dl) and an HDL level above 40. According to the National Institutes of Health, the average HDL level for men is about 45, and for women, it is 55.

High levels of LDLS could be caused by a number of factors, including:

- Heredity
- A diet high in saturated fat
- Excess weight
- A sedentary lifestyle
- Age (blood cholesterol tends to rise until you’re 60 to 65 years old).

It is helpful to eat a healthy diet that includes substantial amounts of soluble fiber found in:

- Oatmeal
- Kidney beans
- Apples
- Pears
- Barley
- Brussels sprouts
- Psyllium
Prunes and polyunsaturated and omega-3 fatty acids, which are in:

- Walnuts
- Almonds

and fatty fish, including mackerel, lake trout, herring, sardines, albacore tuna and salmon

In recent years, some scientists have examined the size of the lipoprotein particles. Some studies indicate that larger lipoproteins are better -- larger HDLs do a better job at cleaning out cholesterol, and larger LDLS tend not to form deposits. While interesting, these findings are preliminary.

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