

Mayo Clinic minute: How cholesterol affects your heart

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Most people know that high cholesterol is bad for their heart, but few people really understand what cholesterol is. Dr. Claire Haga, a Mayo Clinic family physician, explains why it's so closely related to heart problems. She also discusses the power you have to control it.

We see it listed on food labels and hear [health care professionals](#) talk about it, but few people know what cholesterol actually is.

"You do need cholesterol to help with healthy brain formation. However, there is bad cholesterol, and this is what actually builds the plaques in our arteries," Dr. Haga says. "And that's where we get concerned."

Cholesterol is a waxy substance that's found in the fats in your blood. When you have [high cholesterol](#)

, you may develop fatty deposits in your blood vessels, which eventually could make it difficult for enough blood to flow through your arteries.

"So that [bad cholesterol](#), when those plaques build, if they rupture, they can ... cause a [heart attack](#) or even a stroke," Dr. Haga says.

Dr. Haga says what you eat affects your cholesterol levels, so you have some power to control it.

"Examples of trans fats, a lot of this is going to be your products that are prepackaged, sometimes things like donuts and cookies," Dr. Haga says. "There are things that are made with shortening, fast foods, fried foods. (You should) really try ... to eliminate those."

You also want to cut back on saturated fats that often are found in animal products, such as bacon or butter.

Dr. Haga says you also can lower your cholesterol when you take in more omega-3, which is the good fat that you find in fish, nuts and avocado. Getting more whey protein in your diet also can lower your cholesterol.

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