Lipids (Blood Fat): The Lowdown

LDL. HDL. Triglycerides. What are they? What do the numbers mean? Why are they so important to my health?

Low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol, high-density lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol, and triglycerides are all types of cholesterol — that is, lipids (fats) in your bloodstream. Cholesterol is a soft, waxy substance in the bloodstream, which your body uses to make new cells. But too much cholesterol can build up on your artery walls. LDL cholesterol and triglycerides are considered "bad" because they can build up and clog your arteries, blocking the blood flow to your heart and brain. HDL cholesterol is considered "good" because it helps remove the "bad" fats (LDLs and triglycerides) from your bloodstream.

But some people have too much "bad" cholesterol, and not enough of the good type. This can happen by eating too many foods high in cholesterol, *trans* and saturated fats, or by not getting enough regular physical activity — or both. But it can also be a problem they inherited from their family's genes.

The problem with too much of the bad types of lipid (LDLs and triglycerides) in your bloodstream is that it can lead to cardiovascular disease, the No. 1 killer in the United States. How does this happen? These blood lipids can create deposits that build up on the inside walls of your arteries, called plaques. This build up chokes off the artery, reducing blood flow through your body. This condition is called atherosclerosis, and it can lead to heart disease, stroke, a heart attack, or other serious, life-threatening conditions.

HDL cholesterol, on the other hand, is a good thing for your body. HDL may help remove the excess cholesterol, including LDLs and triglycerides, from your bloodstream. That helps keep your arteries clear so your body gets all the blood it needs to function.

How do you know if you have too much "bad" cholesterol, or enough of the "good" cholesterol? That's where your healthcare provider can help.