# High Cholesterol

This sheet is about having high cholesterol during pregnancy and while breastfeeding. This information is based on published research studies. This information should not take the place of medical care and advice from your healthcare provider.

## *What is cholesterol?*

Cholesterol is a waxy substance that our bodies make to help build healthy cells. There are two types of cholesterol: the high-density lipoprotein cholesterol (HDL) (often called “good” cholesterol) and the low-density lipoprotein cholesterol (LDL) called “bad” cholesterol.

People also get some cholesterol from eating certain foods. Foods high in cholesterol includes butter, fatty meat, and full fat cheese. Lack of exercise, being overweight, and eating foods with high cholesterol can all increase levels of LDL cholesterol. Smoking cigarettes lowers the amount of HDL cholesterol in the body. Some people have a genetic condition called Familial Hypercholesterolemia (FH) that causes very high levels of LDL cholesterol. For people with FH, medication is usually needed to lower their LDL cholesterol levels.

High cholesterol can reduce blood flow and increase the chance of acute pancreatitis (inflamed pancreas) and heart disease, which can lead to heart attacks and strokes.

## *I have high cholesterol. What should I talk about with my healthcare team before I get pregnant?*

It is important to talk to your healthcare team (including your obstetrician, primary care provider, cardiologist, endocrinologist, dietician, etc.) about plans for treating your condition before and during pregnancy, during delivery, and after delivery. If possible, talk with your healthcare team before getting pregnant. If your pregnancy is unplanned, contact your healthcare providers as soon as you find out you are pregnant. Each woman with high cholesterol is unique and personalized clinical management is important for pregnancy and breastfeeding.

Topics to talk about with your healthcare team include:

- Ways to monitor your pregnancy and your disease symptoms.
- Any medications or vitamins you should take during pregnancy.
- Getting any necessary vaccines before and during pregnancy. Many vaccines can be given in pregnancy. For more information, please see the MotherToBaby fact sheet on vaccines at https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/vaccines-pregnancy/.
- Any other questions or concerns you have.

## *I have high cholesterol. Can it make it harder for me to get pregnant?*

It is not known if high cholesterol can make it harder to get pregnant. One study suggests it might take longer to get pregnant if a woman has high cholesterol. However, related factors like diabetes, obesity, and polyendocrine metabolic ovarian syndrome (PMOS) could make it harder to get pregnant. For more information on obesity and diabetes, see our sheets on obesity https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/obesity-pregnancy/ and diabetes https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/type-1-and-type-2-diabetes/ and https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/diabetes-pregnancy/.

### *I just found out I am pregnant. Should I stop taking my medication for high cholesterol?*

Sometimes when women find out they are pregnant, they think about changing how they take their medication, or stopping their medication altogether. However, it is important to talk with your healthcare providers before making any changes to how you take your medication. Your healthcare providers can talk with you about the benefits of treating your condition and the risks of untreated illness during pregnancy.

### *Will pregnancy affect my cholesterol levels?*

For most women, cholesterol levels lower slightly in early pregnancy but then increase. Diet, exercise, genetics, and the use of medications can affect cholesterol levels. Talk with your healthcare providers if you are worried about your cholesterol levels.

### *Does having high cholesterol increase the chance of miscarriage?*

Miscarriage is common and can occur in any pregnancy for many different reasons. Based on the studies reviewed, having high cholesterol alone is not expected to increase the chance of miscarriage. However, related medical factors, like diabetes and obesity, might increase the chance for miscarriage.

### *Does having high cholesterol increase the chance of birth defects?*

Birth defects can happen in any pregnancy for different reasons. Out of all babies born each year, about 3 out of 100 (3%) will have a birth defect. We look at research studies to try to understand if an exposure, like high cholesterol, might increase the chance of birth defects in a pregnancy. Having high cholesterol alone is not expected to increase the chance for birth defects above the background risk. Other related medical factors, like diabetes and obesity, can increase the chance of birth defects.

### *Does having high cholesterol increase the chance of other pregnancy-related problems?*

Based on the studies reviewed, it is not known if high cholesterol can increase the chance of other pregnancy-related problems. Some studies have reported an increased chance for gestational diabetes, preeclampsia (dangerously high blood pressure in pregnancy), preterm delivery (birth before 37 weeks) or low birth weight (weighing less than 5 pounds, 8 ounces [2500 grams] at birth). Other studies have not reported an increased chance of pregnancy complications. Other related medical factors, like diabetes and obesity, can increase the chance of other pregnancy-related problems.

### *Does having high cholesterol in pregnancy affect future behavior or learning for the child?*

It is not known if high cholesterol in a pregnancy can cause behavior or learning issues. Related factors like diabetes and obesity might increase the chance for behavior or learning issues.

### *Breastfeeding while taking medication for high cholesterol:*

There are different medications used to treat high cholesterol. For information on a specific medication, see our information sheets https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/ or contact MotherToBaby. Be sure to talk to your healthcare providers about all of your breastfeeding questions.

### *If a man has high cholesterol, could it affect his fertility or increase the chance of birth defects?*

High cholesterol could affect fertility (ability to make healthy sperm). In general, exposures that men have are unlikely to increase the risks to a pregnancy. For more information, please see the MotherToBaby fact sheet on male exposures at https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/paternal-exposures-pregnancy/.

Please click here for references.

**Questions? Call 866.626.6847 | Text 855.999.3525 | Email or Chat at MotherToBaby.org**.

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