

High Cholesterol

This sheet is about having high cholesterol during pregnancy and while breastfeeding. 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 include 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. 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 and obesity may also make it harder to get pregnant. For more information on obesity and diabetes, see our fact sheets here

<https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/obesity-pregnancy/> and here

<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 go down slightly in early pregnancy but then increase again. Diet, exercise, and the use of medications can affect cholesterol levels. Talk with your healthcare providers if you are worried about your cholesterol levels.

Does having/getting high cholesterol increase the chance for 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 for miscarriage. However, related factors like diabetes and obesity may increase the chance for miscarriage.

Does having/getting high cholesterol increase the chance of birth defects?

Every pregnancy starts out with a 3-5% chance of having a birth defect. This is called the background risk. Based on the studies reviewed, having high cholesterol alone is not expected to increase the chance for birth defects above the background risk. Related factors like diabetes and obesity can increase the chance for birth defects.

Does having/getting 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 reported no increase in pregnancy complications.

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

Based on the studies reviewed, it is not known if high cholesterol can cause behavior or learning issues. Related factors like diabetes and obesity may increase the chance for behavior or learning issues.

Breastfeed while taking medication for high cholesterol:

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

If a man has high cholesterol, could it affect fertility (ability to get a woman pregnant) or increase the chance of birth defects?

Studies on sperm quality and high cholesterol have mostly looked at the use of cholesterol medication. High cholesterol alone could reduce the chance of a man conceiving a pregnancy. In general, exposures that men have are unlikely to increase risks to a pregnancy. For more information, please see the MotherToBaby fact sheet on Paternal 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](https://mothertobaby.org).

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