



High Cholesterol

In every pregnancy, a woman starts out with a 3-5% chance of having a baby with a birth defect. This is called her background risk. This sheet talks about whether having high cholesterol during pregnancy may increase the risk for birth defects over that background risk. This information should not take the place of medical care and advice from your health care provider.

What is high cholesterol?

Cholesterol is a substance in the body that is needed for your body to work properly. Too much cholesterol, however, increases the chance for heart disease, which can lead to heart attacks and strokes. A blood test can tell if you have too much cholesterol.

There are two types of cholesterol, often called “good” (HDL) and “bad” (LDL) cholesterol. Your body makes its own cholesterol. Some people have a hereditary (genetic) disorder known as Familial Hypercholesterolemia (FH) that causes very high LDL cholesterol. For people with FH, medication is usually needed to lower their LDL 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 all increase your bad cholesterol. Smoking cigarettes decreases the amount of good cholesterol in your body.

Will having high cholesterol make it harder for me to get pregnant?

In general, women with high cholesterol do not have a harder time getting pregnant than women the same age without high cholesterol. However, there is one study that suggested it may take longer for women with high cholesterol to get pregnant.

How will pregnancy affect my cholesterol levels?

For most women, cholesterol levels lower slightly in early pregnancy but then increase. Also remember that diet and exercise can affect cholesterol levels. Speak with your health care provider if you are worried about your cholesterol levels.

Does having high cholesterol increase my chance for miscarriage?

Women with high cholesterol have a similar chance for miscarriage as other women their age.

Can having high cholesterol increase the chance for my baby to have a birth defect?

Studies have not found a greater chance for birth defects from high cholesterol alone. Related factors like diabetes and obesity can increase the chance for birth defects. See our MotherToBaby fact sheets on obesity and diabetes during pregnancy at <https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/obesity-pregnancy/pdf/> and <https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/diabetes-pregnancy/pdf/>.

Does having higher cholesterol mean that I will have a higher chance for pregnancy complications?

It is not clear. Some studies have found no increase in pregnancy complications, while other studies have found an increased chance for gestational diabetes, preeclampsia (high blood pressure and changes in kidney function), and premature delivery (before 37 weeks). More studies are needed to know if there really is a higher chance for pregnancy complications with higher cholesterol levels.

I am pregnant. Should I stop taking my medication for high cholesterol?

Talk to your healthcare provider before stopping any medications. For information on specific medications, see our MotherToBaby fact sheets at <https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets-parent/> or contact MotherToBaby toll-free at 1-866-626-6847. It is important that you discuss all treatment options with your health care providers when planning pregnancy, or as soon as you learn that you are pregnant.

Can I take my medication for high cholesterol while breastfeeding?

There are different medications used to treat high cholesterol. For information on your specific medication see our medication fact sheets or contact MotherToBaby. Be sure to talk to your health care providers about all medications you use while breastfeeding.

What if the father of the baby has high cholesterol?

Studies on sperm quality and high cholesterol have mostly looked at the father's use of cholesterol medicines. There is suggestive but no clear evidence that high cholesterol alone reduces a man's chance to father a child. In general, exposures that fathers have do not increase risks to a pregnancy. For more information, please see the MotherToBaby fact sheet on Paternal Exposures and Pregnancy at <https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/paternal-exposures-pregnancy/pdf/>.

MotherToBaby is currently conducting a study looking at high cholesterol and the medications used to treat this condition in pregnancy. If you are interested in taking part in this study, please call 1-877-311-8972 or sign up at <https://mothertobaby.org/join-study/>.

References available upon request.

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