High Cholesterol

This sheet talks 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 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.

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

In general, people with high cholesterol do not have a harder time getting pregnant than people of the same age without high cholesterol. However, there is one study that suggested it might take longer to get pregnant if a person has high cholesterol.

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

Talk with your healthcare providers before making any changes to how you take your medication(s). For information on your specific medications, see our MotherToBaby fact sheets at https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets-parent/ or contact a MotherToBaby specialist. It is important that you discuss all treatment options with your healthcare providers when planning pregnancy, or as soon as you learn that you are pregnant.

How will pregnancy affect my cholesterol levels?

For most people, cholesterol levels lower slightly in early pregnancy but then increase. Also remember that diet and exercise, as well as use of medications, can affect cholesterol levels. Speak with your healthcare providers if you are worried about your cholesterol levels.

Does having high cholesterol increase the chance for miscarriage?

Miscarriage can occur in any pregnancy. People with high cholesterol have a similar chance for miscarriage as other people their age.

Does having 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. 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 on diabetes at https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/obesity-pregnancy/ and https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/diabetes-pregnancy/.

Could having high cholesterol cause other pregnancy complications?

Based on the data available, it is not clear if high cholesterol can cause other pregnancy complications. 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 preterm delivery (before 37 weeks).

One study suggested that high cholesterol in pregnancy can cause exposed children to have fat deposits in their arteries (atherosclerosis) when they get older, even if those children do not have high cholesterol themselves.
Does having high cholesterol in pregnancy cause long-term problems for the child?
Based on the data available, it is not known if high cholesterol in pregnancy can cause behavioral or learning issues.

Can I breastfeed while taking my medication for high cholesterol?
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 healthcare provider about all of your breastfeeding questions.

I have high cholesterol. Can it make it harder for me to get my partner pregnant or increase the chance of birth defect?
Studies on sperm quality and high cholesterol have mostly looked at the person’s use of cholesterol medication. There is suggestive, but no clear evidence, that high cholesterol alone could reduce the chance to get a partner pregnant. In general, exposures that fathers or sperm donors have do not 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.