



# Patient education: High triglycerides (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

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## What are high triglycerides?

These are fat-like substances in the blood. Everyone has them, but some people have too much of them. This can cause high levels of triglycerides in the blood, also called "high triglycerides."

People with high triglycerides have a higher risk of heart attack, stroke, and other health problems than people with normal triglycerides.

People with very high triglycerides can get inflammation in the pancreas. The pancreas is an organ that makes hormones and fluids to help the body break down food. When the pancreas gets inflamed, it can cause serious health problems.

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## What should my triglyceride level be?

Ask your doctor or nurse what your triglyceride level should be. In general, levels are:

- Normal – Less than 150 mg/dL. (If you live outside of the US, triglycerides are measured differently. The normal level is less than 1.7 mmol/L.)
- A little high – 150 to 499 mg/dL (1.7 to 5.6 mmol/L).
- Moderately high – 500 to 999 mg/dL (5.6 to 11.3 mmol/L).
- Very high – Greater than 1000 mg/dL (>11.3 mmol/L).

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## Am I at higher risk for heart attack or stroke?

Yes. Having high triglycerides increases your risk of having a heart attack or stroke. But this is just one of many things that can increase your risk. You are also at higher risk if you:

- Have a high level of "LDL" cholesterol – Your LDL level affects your risk of a heart attack or stroke even more than your triglycerides.

- Smoke cigarettes
- Have high blood pressure
- Have excess body weight
- Have a parent or sibling who got heart disease at a young age. (Young, in this case, means younger than 55 for males and younger than 65 for females.)
- Are male – Females are at risk too, but males have a higher risk.
- Are older
- Have diabetes, especially if you have trouble managing your blood sugar

Your doctor can talk to you about your personal risk of having a heart attack or stroke. There are things you can do to lower your risk.

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## Should I take medicine to lower my triglycerides?

Not everyone who has high triglycerides needs to take medicine to lower them. Your doctor or nurse will decide if you need medicine. It depends on how high your triglycerides are and your age, family history, and other health concerns.

Medicines can include:

- Statins – Many people with high triglycerides also have high LDL cholesterol. Medicines called statins lower LDL cholesterol levels and can reduce the risk of having a heart attack or stroke.
- Medicines to lower triglyceride levels – These include [fenofibrate](#) (sample brand names: Antara, Lopid), fish oil (brand name: Lovaza), or, rarely, nicotinic acid (sample brand names: Niacor, Niaspan).

The medicine you take will depend on your triglyceride levels and other factors. If your triglycerides are very high, you might need more than 1 medicine.

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## Can I lower my triglycerides without medicines?

Yes, you might be able to lower high triglycerides if you:

- Lose weight (if you have excess body weight) – Your doctor or nurse can help you do this in a healthy way.

- Get regular exercise.
- Make healthy diet changes – For example, you can:
  - Avoid foods and drinks with a lot of sugar and carbohydrates. These include white bread, fruit juice, soda, and sweets.
  - Limit red meat, butter, fried foods, cheese, oils, and nuts.
  - Eat fish that contain high levels of omega-3 fatty acids, such as salmon, herring, or anchovies.
- Manage your blood sugar – If you have diabetes, keeping your blood sugar in a healthy range can help lower your triglycerides.
- Limit alcohol – This generally means no more than 2 drinks a day for males, and no more than 1 drink a day for females. If your triglycerides are over 500 mg/dL, ask your doctor or nurse if it is safe to drink alcohol.

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## More on this topic

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