

Understanding the Updated Lipid Guidelines



Lipid guidelines provide evidence-based recommendations for preventing and managing lipids levels, also known as cholesterol, to reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease. Abnormal lipid levels are a major contributor to atherosclerotic cardiovascular disease (ASCVD), the leading cause of death worldwide.

In March 2026, the American Heart Association and other groups issued updated guidelines for managing cholesterol. These guidelines emphasize earlier screening, more proactive management, updated cholesterol targets, and more aggressive treatment of elevated cholesterol. These changes reflect longstanding evidence that high cholesterol increases the risk of heart attack, stroke, and other vascular diseases, while emphasizing that effective treatment can significantly reduce these risks.

Defining the Terms:

- **LDL, low-density lipoprotein ("bad" cholesterol):** Carries cholesterol through the bloodstream. High LDL levels can lead to plaque buildup in the arteries, increasing the risk of heart disease, heart attack, and stroke.
- **HDL, high-density lipoprotein ("good" cholesterol):** Helps remove excess cholesterol from the bloodstream and carries it to the liver for disposal, helping protect against heart disease.
- **ApoB (Apolipoprotein B):** A measure of the number of cholesterol-carrying particles that can contribute to plaque buildup in the arteries. Higher ApoB levels are associated with an increased risk of heart disease.
- **CAC (Coronary Artery Calcium) Score:** A number based on a specialized CT scan that measures calcium buildup in the arteries of the heart. Higher scores suggest more plaque and a greater risk of heart disease.
- **Lp(a) (Lipoprotein(a)):** A type of cholesterol particle that can increase the risk of heart disease and stroke. Lp(a) levels are largely determined by genetics and are not significantly affected by lifestyle changes.



What's New? Updated guidelines broken down:

- **Earlier cholesterol testing:** Beginning in childhood, with personalized care based on an updated risk assessment tool.
- **Advanced risk assessment:** Expanded use of Lp(a) and ApoB testing to identify cardiovascular risk that may not be captured by standard cholesterol tests. Lp(a) is recommended at least once in adulthood, while ApoB can further clarify risk in borderline cases.
- **More personalized risk assessment:** Coronary artery calcium (CAC) scoring is recommended more broadly than in the past to help refine cardiovascular risk and guide prevention strategies, particularly when treatment decisions are uncertain.
- **Statins remain first-line therapy:** Statins remain recommended for those at higher cardiovascular risk or with existing vascular disease, with updated guidance supporting more individualized LDL cholesterol targets for some groups.
- **Lower LDL cholesterol targets:** Updated guidance recommends aiming for an LDL ("bad" cholesterol) level below 100 mg/dL for most adults over age 30, with more aggressive targets (LDL <70 mg/dL) for those at higher cardiovascular risk.
- **Updated risk prediction tools:** The PREVENT-ASCVD calculator estimates both 10-year and 30-year cardiovascular risk, helping clinicians identify risk earlier and tailor prevention strategies to optimize long-term outcomes.

Risk Factors	Description
Family history and genetics	• History of premature ASCVD in a parent or sibling, onset before age 55 in men or before age 65 in women • High polygenic risk score (genetic variants for CAD in genome) • Certain racial and ethnic groups, including Black Americans, South Asians, and Indigenous populations, experience higher rates of cardiovascular disease (CVD)
Chronic Conditions	• Inflammatory conditions like Systemic lupus erythematosus and rheumatoid arthritis • Diabetes • High blood pressure • Chronic kidney disease
Demographics and Lifestyle	• Older age • Gender, with men at higher risk than women • Smoking • Alcohol use



Talk to your doctor for more information about cardiovascular risk testing and newer treatment options, and to determine which screenings and strategies are appropriate for you.