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Triglycerides

What are triglycerides?

Triglycerides are a type of lipids (fat). Your body gets triglycerides from fats in the food you eat and it can also make triglycerides in the liver. When your body digests food, fats in the food change to triglycerides. Your body can also make more triglycerides in the liver from fat, carbohydrates, and protein. Triglycerides are carried by the blood to all parts of your body to be used as energy or stored as fat.

What is a normal triglyceride level?

A blood test can measure the level of triglycerides in your blood. The levels vary with age. They also depend on when you last ate before the test. The measurement is most accurate if you have not eaten in the last 12 hours or so. Generally, you want your triglyceride level to be 150 mg/dL or less. A level between 150 and 199 mg/dL is borderline high. A level of 200 mg/dL is high. Triglycerides rarely reach extremely high levels unless you have an inherited tendency for high levels.

How are triglycerides associated with cholesterol?

Triglycerides combine with a protein in your blood to form chemicals called high-density and low-density lipoproteins. The lipoproteins contain cholesterol, which is another substance related to fats.

What causes high triglyceride levels?

High triglyceride levels may have several causes:

- Weight gain. Triglyceride levels usually increase as your weight increases.
- Too many calories in your diet, especially from sugar and alcohol. Alcohol increases your liver's production of triglycerides and reduces the amount of fat cleared from your blood.
- Age. Triglyceride levels steadily increase as you grow older.
- Medicines. Certain drugs, such as birth control pills, steroids, and diuretics (water pills) can cause triglyceride levels to rise.
- Illness. Medical conditions associated with high triglyceride levels are diabetes, hypothyroidism, kidney disease, and liver disease.
- Heredity. Some forms of high triglycerides occur among members of the same families.

What are the risks of high triglyceride levels?

If your cholesterol is normal, a high triglyceride level does not appear to be a risk factor for heart disease. A level above normal may be a risk factor for diabetes. Very high triglycerides may increase the risk for inflammation of the pancreas (pancreatitis).

How are triglycerides measured?

Your healthcare provider can measure your triglyceride level with a simple blood test. You should not eat for 12 to 14 hours before the test. Your provider wants to know only the amount of triglycerides being made by your liver, not what is produced by digestion.

How are high levels treated and prevented?

Here are things you can do to lower or prevent a high triglyceride level.

- Lose weight.
- Get regular exercise.
- Eat less sugar and sugar-containing foods.
- Eat small meals and snacks throughout the day instead of 2 or 3 large meals.
- Drink less alcohol. Alcohol can increase the liver's production of triglycerides.
- Limit the fat in your diet to less than 35% of your daily calories.

If these lifestyle changes do not lower your triglyceride levels, your healthcare provider may prescribe a medicine to decrease the liver's production of triglycerides and to clear triglycerides from your blood. The medicine will also help reduce cholesterol.

Fish oil also has been found to reduce triglycerides. Two or three meals of fish such as salmon or mackerel every week may help lower your triglyceride levels.

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