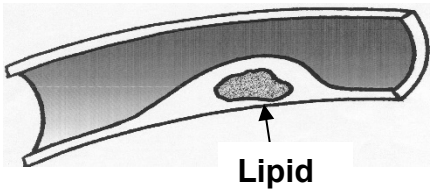
Coronary Artery Plaque

Plaques are fats or lipids that build up inside the wall of arteries. They are a sign of damage to its fragile lining. High cholesterol levels in your blood can make the build up bigger and cause the blood vessel to thicken.

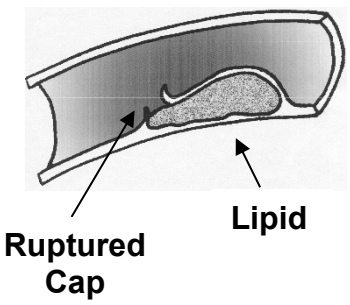
Most plaques are not found during a stress test because they **do not** block blood flow; but, if the plaque grows large enough, it can reduce blood flow and cause angina (chest pain from the heart). If a plaque breaks open, a blood clot can form and cause a heart attack or sudden angina. Most heart attacks are caused by small plaques that break open.

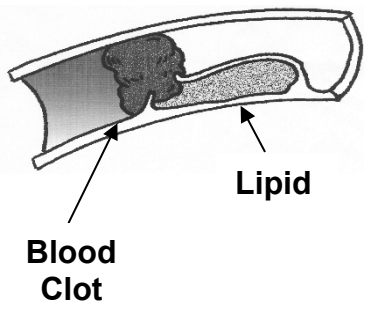
Stable plaques have a thick cap and a small lipid core. As it grows and blocks the artery, other vessels grow in to supply blood to the heart muscle.



Stable plaques can cause angina or abnormal stress tests. If they grow large enough to block an artery, they can cause a heart attack.

Unstable plaques have a thin cap that lies over a large lipid core. If the cap bursts or erodes, a blood clot forms. Sudden complete blockage of the vessel causes a sudden heart attack or cardiac death.





Your health care team may have given you this information as part of your care. If so, please use it and call if you have any questions. If this information was not given to you as part of your care, please check with your doctor. This is not medical advice. This is not to be used for diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. Because each person's health needs are different, you should talk with your doctor or others on your health care team when using this information. If you have an emergency, please call 911. Copyright © 5/2025 University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Department of Nursing HF#5818.

My Cholesterol Levels Log

Name: _____ **Medical Record #:** _____

Procedure/Date: _____ **My cholesterol-lowering medicine**: _____

Call your local doctor and schedule a visit for _____. Cholesterol levels drawn sooner than this may result in a false reading. To get an accurate test result, you need to fast 12 hours before having your blood drawn.

Blood cholesterol	My Goal	Date:	Date:	Date:	Date:
LDL (bad cholesterol)	Less than 100				
Triglycerides (a form of fat)	Less than 150				
HDL (good cholesterol)	More than 40				
Total cholesterol	Less than 160 with blood vessel disease Less than 200 without blood vessel disease				

LDL Low density lipoprotein

- "Bad" cholesterol
- Builds up in arteries.
- To **lower** LDL: eat foods low in saturated fat and cholesterol and take medicine.

Triglycerides

- A form of fat
- Come from food and are made by the body.
- To **lower**: exercise, lose weight, manage your blood sugar levels, decrease intake of alcohol, saturated fats, and cholesterol.

HDL High Density Lipoprotein

- "Good" cholesterol
- Takes cholesterol away from the arteries.
- To **increase** HDL: exercise, lose weight, and stop smoking.

Total cholesterol

- Number you most often receive.
- Tells us your risk of heart disease.