Cholesterol

There are two types of cholesterol: “good” and “bad.” It’s important to understand the difference, and to know the levels of “good” and “bad” cholesterol in your blood. Too much of one type — or not enough of another — can put you at risk for coronary heart disease, heart attack or stroke.

Testing

A complete cholesterol test — also called a lipid panel or lipid profile — is a group of blood tests that can measure the amount of cholesterol and triglycerides in your blood. A cholesterol test can help determine your risk of atherosclerosis, the buildup of plaques in your arteries that can lead to narrowed or blocked arteries throughout your body. If your cholesterol levels are high, you probably won’t have any signs or symptoms, so a cholesterol test is an important tool.

At least annual cholesterol testing is important if you are age 18 or older and have a family history of high cholesterol or heart disease, are overweight, are physically inactive, have diabetes, and/or eat a high-fat diet. Talk with your doctor about the cholesterol test schedule that is right for you.

Managing Your Cholesterol

The best way to help prevent heart disease is by eating a heart-healthy diet and to get at least thirty minutes of moderately vigorous physical activity on five or more days of the week.

Your doctor may also prescribe medication to help you control your cholesterol. Medication is usually only prescribed for those who — despite adequate dietary changes, regular exercise and weight loss - still have elevated levels of cholesterol, or those who have elevated risks for heart disease and stroke. Your LDL control goal is < 100 mg LDL.

Heart Healthy Diet

Even if you have years of unhealthy eating under your belt, making a few changes in your diet can reduce cholesterol and improve your heart health.

Choose healthier fats — Choose leaner cuts of meat, low-fat dairy and monounsaturated fats (found in olive, peanut and canola oils) for a healthier option. Reduce Saturated fats (found in red meats, dairy, etc.) to no more than 10% of your daily calories.

Eliminate Trans Fats — Trans fat can be found in fried foods and commercial baked products such as cookies and crackers.

Limit Your Cholesterol Intake — Aim for no more than 300 milligrams of cholesterol a day — less than 200 mg if you have heart disease. You can do so by using lean cuts of meet, egg substitutes and skim milk.

Choose Whole Grains — Various nutrients found in whole grains promote heart health. Choose whole-grain breads, whole-wheat pasta, whole-wheat four and brown rice.

Stock up on Fruits and Vegetables — Fruits and vegetables are rich in dietary fiber, which can help lower cholesterol. Snack on season fruits. If you prefer dried fruits, limit yourself to no more than a handful as they tend to have more calories.

Eat foods rich in Omega-3 Fatty Acids — Make sure to include fish such as salmon, mackerel and herring. They are rich in Omega-3 fatty acids and can help lower your LDL (“bad”) cholesterol. Other good sources are walnuts, almonds and ground flaxseeds.

Tips For Eating Out

You can eat out and eat healthy too! Follow the tips below for a healthier meal.

- Ask for smaller portions or put half of your meal in a to-go box to enjoy later.
- Ask that your food be prepared without added salt.
- Have gravy, sauces and dressing served on the side.
- Ask for fat-free or 1% milk instead of whole milk.
- Look for steamed, broiled, baked, grilled, poached or roasted foods.
- Request your meal to be prepared with vegetable oil or margarine instead of butter.

True or False:

Q: If I have high cholesterol, all I need to do is take medication.

A: False. Do you smoke? Do you eat too much saturated fat, trans fat or cholesterol? Are you physically inactive? All of these factors can affect your cholesterol levels. If heart-healthy eating, at least thirty minutes of moderate physical activity five days per week and quitting smoking doesn’t lower your cholesterol, your doctor may then prescribe medication.

Resources:
American Heart Association
and The Mayo Clinic