Approximately 20% of the American population is considered to have high blood cholesterol levels of 240 mg/dL or higher. These people are twice as likely to have a heart attack as those with desirable cholesterol levels (200 mg/dL or less). Do you know your blood cholesterol level?

Cholesterol is a fat-like substance that the body uses to make hormones, cell walls, and other body compounds. The liver manufactures the amount of cholesterol necessary to perform these functions. Therefore, it is not necessary for us to consume additional dietary cholesterol. Some health authorities suggest that everyone over the age of two limit their cholesterol intake to less than 300 milligrams a day. It is also recommended that we eat a diet low in fat and specifically saturated fat. An eating plan that follows these recommendations can decrease the risk of heart disease for many people.

A high level of blood cholesterol is a prime risk factor for coronary heart disease. Coronary heart disease occurs when the arteries supplying the heart with blood become clogged. Cholesterol, fat and other substances are deposited in the inner lining of the arteries, causing them to become thick and hard. As a result, the passageways in the arteries become smaller, making it more difficult for blood to flow to the heart. Over time, the arteries may become completely blocked, blood flow to the heart is significantly reduced and a heart attack occurs. Other common terms for this condition include atherosclerosis, coronary artery disease, and hardening of the arteries.

Fortunately, a high level of blood cholesterol is a risk factor over which most of us have some control. A variety of behaviors contribute to increased blood cholesterol levels: a diet high in saturated fatty acids and cholesterol, smoking, overweight and lack of exercise.

Eating a well-balanced diet low in fat and saturated fat and high in fruits, vegetables and whole grain products will contribute to controlling your risk for high blood cholesterol.

Substances found in cigarette smoke, including nicotine and carbon monoxide, can damage the lining of the arteries. This allows cholesterol and fat to collect in damaged sites and results in narrowed arteries. Smoking also causes the arteries around the heart to contract, reducing blood
flow to the heart. A reduction in high density lipoproteins (HDL), good cholesterol, levels can also result from smoking.

Exercise can help many people lower their blood cholesterol levels. Engaging in physical activity and eating a healthful diet can promote healthy body weight. Exercise also improves blood flow and tones the blood vessels. All of these factors are important in reducing your blood cholesterol levels and reducing your risk for coronary heart disease.

Developing a healthy lifestyle can help you reduce the risk of coronary heart disease.