

Watch Out For That Bad Cholesterol

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High blood cholesterol affects over 65 million Americans. Are you part of the approximately twenty percent of the American population that has a blood cholesterol level of 240mg/dL or higher? Persons in this group are twice as likely to have a heart attack as those with a blood cholesterol level of 200 mg/dL or less. So, do you know your blood cholesterol level?

Cholesterol is a fat-like substance that is part of all human and animal cells. Cholesterol is needed to form hormones, cell membranes, and other body substances. Your body is able to make cholesterol in the liver, so it is not needed in your diet. Some cholesterol in our diet is okay, but many adult Americans take in more than is recommended. This can cause health problems for some 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.

Cholesterol is carried in the body in “packages” of fat, cholesterol, and protein known as lipoproteins. There are two types of lipoproteins – high-density lipoproteins (HDL) and low-density lipoproteins (LDL). LDLs, or “bad” cholesterol, contain a lot of fat and cholesterol which can deposit cholesterol in the arteries, increasing heart disease risk. HDLs, or “good” cholesterol, contain more protein and less fat and cholesterol and can remove cholesterol from the arteries.

According to Dr. Linda Bobroff, Extension Nutrition Specialist for the University of Florida/IFAS, 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 and high in fruits, vegetables, and whole grain products. An eating plan that follows these recommendations can decrease the risk of heart disease for many people.

Other behaviors that contribute to increased blood cholesterol levels include smoking, being overweight, and lack of exercise. Nicotine and carbon monoxide, among other substances, in cigarette smoke can damage the lining of the arteries, allowing cholesterol and fat to deposit in the damaged sites and narrowing arteries. Smoking also causes the arteries around the heart to contract, reducing blood flow to the heart, and can lower HDL levels.

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 and helps to raise HDL levels.

You can find out your blood cholesterol level through a simple blood test by your health care provider. If it is above 200mg/dL, consider making lifestyle changes that can help to lower it to a healthy level. For more information on reducing fat and cholesterol in your diet, contact your local Extension Office.

Have a question? Contact the University of Florida IFAS - Washington/Holmes Counties Extension office at (850)638-6265, weekdays 8 a.m. to noon or 1 to 5 p.m.

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