For Your Heart's Sake, Lower Your Cholesterol

February is National Heart Month

There's a lot of news about cholesterol these days, and with good reason. High cholesterol contributes to heart disease, which kills more Americans than all cancers combined.

What is cholesterol?

Cholesterol is a waxy, fat-like substance that your body, mainly the liver, produces in sufficient quantities to make some hormones, vitamin D, and bile acids, which help to digest fat. Cholesterol also is used to build healthy cell membranes (walls) in the brain, nerves, muscles, skin, liver, intestines, and heart. It only takes a small amount of cholesterol to meet all these needs. Your body makes all the cholesterol it needs; you dont ha ve to get cholesterol in your diet.

Why is a high cholesterol level unhealthy?

Cholesterol causes a problem only when there is too much of it in the blood. When there is excess cholesterol, it is deposited in the lining of the arteries, including the arteries that feed your heart muscle. This narrows the area inside the artery where blood flows. High blood cholesterol itself does not cause symptoms, so many people are unaware that their cholesterol level is too high. You should have your cholesterol checked at least every five years starting at age 20. The most accurate test is a lipoprotein profile - a blood test given after fasting for nine to 12 hours. This test reveals several statistics regarding your cholesterol:

- Total cholesterol

- LDL ("bad") cholesterol; this cholesterol is what's deposited in your arteries

- HDL ("good") cholesterol; this cholesterol helps keep deposits from building up in your arteries

- Triglycerides; these are another form of fat in your blood

Even without a lipoprotein profile, you can get a rough idea of your cholesterol health if you know your total cholesterol and HDL cholesterol. These levels can be determined through a non-fasting cholesterol test often given at shopping malls or health fairs. If your total cholesterol is 200 mg/dL or more, or if your HDL cholesterol is less than 40 mg/dL, you should ask your doctor about getting a complete lipoprotein profile.

Total cholesterol

A total cholesterol level of 200 mg/dL to 239 mg/dL is considered borderline high; 240 mg/dL and above is high.

HDL (high-density lipoprotein) cholesterol

An HDL level of less than 40 mg/dL is low; 40 to 59 mg/dL is satisfactory but not optimal; 60 mg/dL and above is considered optimal. The higher your HDL cholesterol, the better, because it helps protect against heart disease.

LDL (low-density lipoprotein) cholesterol

A high LDL is anything above 130 mg/dL. (An LDL level of 130 to 150 mg/dL is considered borderline high; 160 mg/dL and above is high to very high.) Having a high level of LDL cholesterol can cause fatty plaque to form along the insides of your artery walls. This makes the arteries narrower and stiffer. Narrower arteries mean less room for blood to flow through -- like a partially clogged pipe. This process, called atherosclerosis, develops over a long time. It is especially dangerous if it narrows the vessels to the heart and brain, creating a major risk for heart attack, stroke, and cardiovascular disease.

What causes high cholesterol?

Heredity is the main factor determining your cholesterol. Then, depending on your genetic makeup, your diet is next in line as a risk factor for high cholesterol. Foods containing cholesterol, saturated fats, and trans-fats all contribute to your total cholesterol pool. People with the right genes to handle cholesterol usually have no problem handling a regular fatty diet. For a large portion of the population, however, a bad diet drives the cholesterol up. Many foods that come from animals are high in both saturated fat and cholesterol. Some non-animal foods also are high in saturated fat; these include foods made with coconut and palm oils and hydrogenated vegetable oils like shortening and margarine (trans-fats).

There are many factors that influence your cholesterol levels:

Heredity - Your genes determine how fast LDL is made in your body and removed from your blood. Inherited high cholesterol leads to very high cholesterol levels and can lead to early heart disease.

Weight - Being overweight usually raises your LDL cholesterol. Losing weight may lower your LDL level, as well as your triglycerides, and boost your HDL cholesterol.

Exercise - Getting regular exercise may lower your LDL cholesterol and raise your HDL cholesterol.

Age and gender - Until menopause, women usually have lower total cholesterol levels than those of men. After age 50, women often have higher total cholesterol levels than men of the same age. For both men and women, total cholesterol levels rise until about age 65.

Alcohol - Although alcohol boosts HDL cholesterol, it has no effect on LDL cholesterol, and excessive alcohol consumption raises triglycerides. Too much alcohol also damages the liver, brain and heart.

Stress - Long-term stress can raise cholesterol levels, although this may be because some people try to ease their stress by eating fatty foods. It is the fatty foods that boost cholesterol levels.

The main goal of cholesterol-lowering treatment is to lower your LDL level enough to reduce your risk for developing heart disease or having a heart attack. The higher your risk, the lower your LDL goal will be.

What should you eat?

To eat a heart-healthy diet, you need to cut down on foods high in saturated fats, like fried foods, red meat, processed meats (cold cuts and hot dogs), some kinds of cheese, and most commercially prepared baked goods (muffins, cookies, and doughnuts). Commercial food manufacturers are responding to health concerns by reducing saturated fats and trans-fats in their products. Make sure you check the nutrition label on the foods you buy to ensure you are getting the least possible amount of saturated and trans-fats.

A low-saturated-fat, low-cholesterol eating plan has less than 7 percent of calories from saturated fat and less than 200 mg of dietary cholesterol per day. This plan calls for only enough calories to maintain a desirable weight and avoid weight gain. If reducing your saturated fat and cholesterol intakes doesn't lower your LDL enough, you should increase the amount of soluble fiber in your diet.

Fish is a good choice for a healthy diet. Many types contain high levels of omega-3 fatty acids, which may help lower blood cholesterol and blood pressure and reduce your risk for dangerous blood clotting. Cold-water and fatty fish, such as salmon and herring, contain the most omega-3s.

You should also eat more vegetables, fruits, and whole grains (like oatmeal and barley). They contain fiber, which fills you up, and also limit your fat intake while still giving you the nutrients you need.

If you eat red meat, here are some ways to decrease fat without giving up flavor:

- Decrease the amount of meat in a recipe.
- Serve smaller portions of meat and add more vegetables, grains, and fruit to a meal.
- Select a lean cut when you buy meat. The terms "round" and "loin" indicate lower fat.
- Trim all visible fat from meat before cooking.

Other tips for reducing cholesterol

- Black or green tea, which has powerful antioxidants that may help prevent cholesterol from damaging your arteries.

- Exercise. Regular physical activity -- 30 to 60 minutes on most, if not all days -- is recommended for everyone. It can help raise HDL and lower LDL cholesterol.

- Maintain a healthy weight. Losing weight if you are overweight can lower your LDL cholesterol. Exercising 60 to 90 minutes per day will help maintain weight loss.

- Control your blood pressure.

- Don't smoke.

- Consider medications. If your cholesterol level remains high six months after you change your lifestyle, ask your doctor about available medications that can lower your cholesterol by 25 to 60 percent. Medication is mandatory for cholesterol of 300 mg/dL or higher and is usually recommended for people with cholesterol of 240 mg/dL or higher who do not meet total cholesterol and LDL goals by diet and exercise alone.

For more information:
http://www.americanheart.org